



Chocolate Babies

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As I walked through one of the medical school buildings on the way to my car, I saw an African American woman running in my direction, clearly in a rush. She got a couple of steps past me then doubled back to start a conversation.

“Are you a medical student?” she asked.

“No, I’m a new faculty member in family medicine. I mostly see patients, teach, and help with recruitment.”

“Oh, that’s great! I always make an effort to give a little encouragement to the Black medical students. There aren’t a lot of them. I have to look out for my chocolate babies. Have a good day!” She stopped sprinting, almost as if what she was late for didn’t matter anymore.

“*Chocolate babies? Well that’s new,*” I thought to myself.

There were lots of new things for me during my first year as faculty. One of my mentors in medicine told me that your first year out in practice will be one of your hardest. Every lecture you give will be the first time, and your imposter syndrome comes back as you redefine yourself in this new role. I took that to heart, but I still severely underestimated the emotional toll of becoming a disruptor of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts at my institution straight out of residency.

I felt compelled to informally take on this DEI role because I

knew there was a great need, and I believed I had the skills to make a difference. Before taking on this responsibility, I had multiple talks with mentors who believed I could be successful but worried what it would mean for my career. I knew I could be pigeonholed as the “Black diversity guy” instead of being known as a great educator and clinician. I also knew this work would be incredibly hard and I might have many obstacles in my way.

I embarked upon the position with my eyes wide open, and I was pleasantly surprised by the lack of pushback I received on my DEI endeavors. However, I didn’t expect the greatest challenge I faced to be myself, as I became hyperaware of my identity as a Black man in America working at a majority White institution.

As I educated myself about DEI issues, I struggled with an incredible sense of isolation and inescapable heightened awareness of the racial injustices occurring around me. I also experienced microtrauma. I was forced to reflect on my own negative experiences and the experiences of loved ones, patients, and students. I could see how systems of racism and oppression were affecting them, and I felt overwhelmed by their pain and inadequate in my ability to fix it.

My heart broke as a patient told me she waited years to seek medical care because a White doctor made

her feel her voice didn’t matter. I empathized with a student, who was the only person who looked like him at research conference, which led him to question his place in medicine. I felt the frustration as a resident vented that faculty just don’t get his experience. All I could do was be present, but it didn’t feel good enough. I wasn’t “good enough.”

This struggle with being “good enough” was amplified by recruitment season, as I read the stories of our racially diverse applicants and had to make decisions on whether they should be interviewed or not. Who was I to pass judgment on these “chocolate babies?” The doubt of whether I’m good enough is something I had struggled with for many years, and I found all that insecurity coming back. I was now the person making a value judgment whether someone else that looks like me is “good enough.” I was second guessing my decisions; my work was feeling like a yoke around my neck. I wasn’t just dealing with imposter syndrome, it was beyond that. I was combating systemic and internalized racism, and I wasn’t winning. I was tired of being Black in Academia.

I wasn’t doing well. Though I still found incredible satisfaction in the work I did, I knew something had to change.

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I briefly considered therapy, but the process of finding a therapist of color that I could feel comfortable talking with about the stressors related to my Blackness was depressing and daunting. However, my mental health was of the utmost importance to me, so near the end of my first year, I gave myself an intervention: a word of encouragement, like that from the stranger. *Be kind to yourself. Increase your exercise, reach out to your mentors, and stop suffering in silence. You're doing good work. You're not Superman.*

I wish that was all I needed to find my center, but it was just the beginning. Over the course of the next several months, with the help of mentors, I learned to put things into perspective and focus on my

own wellness and personal vision. I was energized by kind words from my patients and students, and I used writing to help process my experiences.

Two years later, I still have my moments of self-doubt and despair, but they are few and far between. I stay vigilant about my own mental health, especially in the setting of immense inequity and pain being amplified in the Black community right now. I'm proud of the growth I've made in my ability to see opportunities in tragedies, forgive myself for not being perfect, and help those around me process hurt and pain without it overwhelming me.

I love my job and have become even more resolute in being a voice for racial justice. The added burden

of maneuvering through systemic racism is a journey no one should do alone. I hope I'll be able to guide other people of color, throughout their careers, as my mentors continue to guide me.

So, if you need a word of encouragement, I have you covered. Just don't expect me to call you a "chocolate baby."

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