Accept Your Limits, Plan Space in Your Life

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We all know it’s important to insert breathing room into our lives, so why is doing this so hard? It’s important to accept our limits.

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Have you had the kind of week where you haven’t even had a chance to breathe?

That’s not a typo. That is how too many of us operate at home and at work. As a result, we have no room to breathe, get adequate rest, pause, eat thoughtfully, connect with loved ones, and/or enjoy the moment. Today, I tried to “eat mindfully.” I sat at a table, trying to relax into the chair. After placing my lunch in front of me, I spread the napkin on my lap. I didn’t read or type on the computer or finish a chart. Facebook wasn’t open and my email remained unchecked. My goal was to spend at least fifteen minutes eating —quietly relaxing and considering the food I was consuming, consciously aware of the pause in my day.

I made it to seven minutes before I was out of food and out of patience. It is hard to reverse a (bad) habit of quickly eating in front of my computer, while doing two or three other things. Similarly, I find it extremely frustrating to arrive early to a meeting. Inevitably it involves two things I don’t enjoy — either a silent room with nothing to do or small talk with the other early birds. I’d rather swoop in at the perfect moment —the meeting is underway, but I haven’t missed anything important.

Our clinic schedules also have no gap built in. If I only had to see patients, my day would go pretty smoothly. While my clinic day officially has eight hours of back-to-back patient appointments, I know that it will also include completing forms, answering questions, making phone calls, refilling prescriptions, ordering tests, and wading through a large pile in my EHR in-basket. There is no margin for the patient scheduled in a fifteen minute visit that has new onset atrial fibrillation with rapid ventricular response.

Having our lives and schedule jam-packed is unhealthy and causes stress and burnout. However, when there are so many important things to do, purposely choosing to put space in our schedule is a challenge. I know that I am supposed to leave extra time to get places, but I almost never do. It feels wasteful when my to-do list is so long. Yet, the stress of being late bleeds into the rest of my day. I am not a good doctor or mother or wife or friend when I am overwhelmed.

We all know how to insert breathing room into our lives — just say no, expect the unexpected, turn off the phone or the TV, get more sleep, be mindful, disconnect, stop. However, just like our obese patients who know what to eat, we find it challenging to implement the knowledge into lasting change. Why is this? I think it is for a whole lot of “becauses”. Because it’s important. Because they need me. Because I am busy. Because I can do it tomorrow, next week, next month, next year. Because I have to. Because I want to.

Accepting the finite about ourselves is difficult — our finite energy and time, patience, and endurance. However, when we can both accept and accommodate our limits, we will be better able to plan space our lives so that the unexpected is anticipated, the extra ask is something we can answer, and our days are a joy, not a burden.

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