

Topic: What to do when you make a mistake

Personal example

I'm going to get really vulnerable with all of you right now and confess: I have made mistakes in medicine

I have focused too narrowly on a presenting issue and missed a diagnosis

I have had suspicions but not followed through on things

I have forgotten to finish important tasks for patients that resulted in delayed care

It feels super scary to admit that out loud - because we are conditioned to fear the consequences of making mistakes. Being sued, having patients yell at us, having colleagues judge us, etc.

But it is an Inhuman story: It's completely unacceptable to make a mistake in medicine. If you make a mistake, you are a bad person. A wrong person. You shouldn't even be in medicine anymore.

- Floods me with guilt and shame
- In the past it's coloured future encounters - with that patient, with similar other patients, where now I'm so anxious about making another mistake that I am distracted, not listening as closely, OR I feel so much guilt and shame about making the mistake that I want to get out of the room as quickly as possible to avoid spending time with them and being reminded of the mistake I made, and the time I do spend has this undercurrent of trying to "make it up" to them and pleasing them to make sure they're not still mad at me for making the mistake— all of which makes it more likely I'll make another mistake
- Most of us beat ourselves up so badly when we make a mistake that we don't actually learn from it - If these memories of past mistakes sit as sources of shame and fear, they do not make us more aware, they just make us more reactive and defensive in our practice of medicine, which makes our brain MORE error prone, not less.

We think it's the mistake that is causing our guilt and shame and anxiety, but it's actually the belief we have ABOUT the mistake that's the problem

- Imagine if a kid was learning to ride a bike and every time they wobbled or fell down, someone yelled at them and told them they were a terrible cyclist and should be ashamed of themselves - would they actually get better at ride a bike?
- This fear of making mistakes IS our perfectionism - which as we've established, is a tool of oppression used to disconnect us from our humanity
- If we can find a new belief about mistakes that actually serves us- that allows us to reflect on the mistake without making the mistake mean we're terrible or as a threat to our security and happiness- then we can LEARN from our mistakes and develop deeper self-trust to offer ourselves self compassion no matter how many more mistakes we make in the future.

Concrete example: sometimes when I renew a prescription, I don't read the request closely enough and I fax it to the wrong pharmacy, or I don't notice they're actually requesting a

different dose. So then I get a call from the patient or a fax back from the pharmacy letting me know I've made this mistake. I used to feel terrible about these – and it would temporarily make me a bit more vigilant about checking, but it would also make me more anxious about doing prescription renewals, and more likely to avoid them/procrastinate them. So either way - the patient wasn't getting their Rx in a timely manner. But now I don't make that mistake mean that I'm terrible or that I can't trust my brain. Instead, I've started getting curious with myself about what lead to the mistake being made, and what support my brain would need in order to fill the attention gap that's leading me to take in the whole request and double check the dose or pharmacy. I've reflected and I think the main blocks to me being more thorough is feeling rushed and also feeling annoyed about doing the prescriptions at all. So I've given some thought to how I can intentionally invite myself to take my time with each prescription renewal, and remind myself how doing a renewal this way actually saves me time- so I don't have to use a precious appointment spot and have a whole conversation with the patient about the medication. And if I realize I DO need a conversation, then I can stop reading and ask my secretary to book them in with me!

Healing human story: Not only is it inevitable that we will make mistakes, but it serves us to be open and accepting and curious about the mistakes we do make

- A lot of the things we call mistakes, we can only even identify as mistakes after the fact. We literally didn't have all the information we needed to make a different decision actually
- You never have to make yourself wrong in the past to learn and do differently in the future - in fact is much easier and more effective to love and accept that past decision and THEN think about what you can learn for next time
- When I think of the diagnoses I missed, I honestly can't imagine that if I'd researched a little more, or thought a little longer, I would have come up with the correct diagnosis sooner. AND now that I've seen what I've seen, AND OFFERED LOVE TO MY PAST SELF FOR NOT SEEING IT THEN - that experience is a part of my learning I can carry into my future encounters.
- I like renaming my mistakes as Undesired Outcomes. Then I can sit with the sadness and discomfort of witnessing something I wanted to go well, instead go another way. And then after that, I can look at that situation with clear eyes and actually enrich my knowledge and experience for the next patient.
- ESPECIALLY for "silly" mistakes - do I want it to mean "I always do this!" and beat myself up OR I did it and now what?

This skill of compassionate debriefing is one that I have thought deeply about, and have begun to teach to my clients in my new coaching program Stop Worrying About Your Patients. You will notice you stop losing sleep worrying about your patients when you change your story about clinical errors- and are much less likely to make those errors with that rested brain! I am opening up applications to all of you on the podcast before sharing it publically! Link here: