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### It's Not About Me



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I DON'T REALLY FEEL AS THOUGH I'm helping my psychiatry patients improve their lives, or even just feel better – because I'm not doing anything.

I listen to what they tell me, imagine how that must feel, and react accordingly. I don't talk — even when it's tense — I just ride out the moment. I wait to see if they'll trust me to go a little further with their feelings.

They may just be figuring out what they're feeling at that moment, for the first time. Maybe they haven't even had an opportunity to get that deep into their thoughts until just that moment.

So I wait, watching them. Watching them think, cry, and stare into space. And if they don't come back to me, I keep my mouth shut, as much as I might want to give advice, or ask for clarification, or otherwise “prod” the conversation along.

My first week in clinic I met a short Hispanic woman in her late fifties with a bleached blonde crew cut and a turgid face — and a long history of depression and psychosis. She was 7 months out from her 21 year-old son committing suicide. She was hearing voices, and had tried to hang herself with a belt.

Obviously it hadn't worked, and she was bringing herself in for help. After the intake, I recommended to my preceptor that we prescribe some antipsychotics. I made an appointment to see her again the following week.

For the next two weeks her depression and psychosis persisted. Soon she became unable to sleep. We we're trying everything we could think of, and still no sleep.

The third week I decided I wanted to rule out bipolar and anxiety disorders, so I asked her some screening questions. She opened up about how all she does is worry about her life, her family's life, their past, her brother's failed life, her son's suicide, her role in it, on and on and on.

She said all she thinks about is how horrible her life has been, about all the terrible things that have happened to her and her family, and how she worries about what the next horrible thing is going to be. I kept silent, and she kept crying. She remarked at how she'd never thought about all this before. She seemed honestly shocked and surprised at herself, at having never thought about this giant miserable part of her life.

She gave me a quick glance, and started to repeat parts of what she had just said, so I went out on a limb and spoke.

“If you don’t try and find something positive in your life to look forward to, to enjoy for the future, you’re going to end up with a life full of negative memories.” Her eyes opened a little wider.

“I hadn’t thought about that before, but you’re right,” she said. I tried not to get excited, and thought this was probably going to just be an empty realization that wouldn’t actually change behavior, as is so often the case. We wrapped up the meeting shortly thereafter.

She came in my last week on service, and we had our talk about how her week went, how her meds were, what her symptoms were. When I reminded her that this would be the last week that we saw each other, she said that I really helped her.

”Really?” I tried not to sound too surprised. I didn’t want her to think I didn’t think she was better.

“Would you mind telling me what I did, because as a student I’d really like to know what I am doing right.”

“I’m really going to miss you. You aren’t like the others. You listen. You care. I can see it on your face. You let me talk and don’t rush me like the other doctors did. It really helped me.”

Now that’s the thing about helping people. Usually you are an active participant. You are consciously acting, and that action has a positive effect on someone. That effect shows us we can make a difference — that we can manifest our will. Sure, we enjoy seeing the positive effect on others, but there is also pleasure in seeing the effects of our actions in the world and on people.

But in this case my will was pretty ”won’t.” I was consciously acting, but my action was inaction. If we’re not acting, then are we making a difference? And if we’re not making a difference, how can we feel good?

Yes, I spoke, but that wasn’t what she recalled. She thought I was good because I listened. I was good because I did nothing.

So why should I feel good if I haven’t done anything? How can I see my value to others if I am not actively doing? It’s true that part of my identity is tied up in expressing myself and affecting others. I’m tempted to believe that if I’m not doing, I’m not doing good.

But I was doing good, she told me so. So how do I reconcile that dichotomy?

I’m taking solace in knowing that her life was improved, and she sees it as a result of something I did. In this instance, I can attempt to recreate that positivity because she told me “specifically” what I did.

But in other situations, I might not have that knowledge to take with me. What then? To be satisfied with my life, I either have to change what satisfies me, find a way to be satisfied without expressing myself, or go into another line of work.

I like the idea of being content and happy with just the notion that I helped someone, without understanding

how I helped them.

It reminds me of trust and faith in God. I can't understand God, just as I can't understand how I might help some people, but there is value in the attempt to believe that is real, even if I can't understand it. Sometimes we're successful in that attempt, and sometimes we're left empty handed.

There is value for me in that trust and faith. It puts my mindset in a better place, and I know that because of that attempt, I'm a happier person to be around. I have more love, joy, peace and patience. I am more kind, good, gentle and have more self-control. All through this attempt for trust and faith in something I don't understand.

So, I've accepted the fact that, really, it doesn't have to be about me, as long as I'm helping people. Come to think of it, if I look at it that way, why does it have to be about me when people are irritated with me?

Maybe I'll think about that one the next time it happens.

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