

A Reflective Vignette

How Personal Experiences Can Help Professionals Become Better Practitioners

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I have often found it staggering to witness what some people consider emergencies. Panic attacks, being overwhelmed by work and family life, and needing to talk to someone from either loneliness or boredom are often put in the same category as suffering domestic violence or having a child with cancer. So, what is an emergency and who defines it? Perhaps an emergency must be experienced.

I have always considered that whatever interaction one has with another person, particularly a therapeutic interaction between a counselor or psychotherapist and a patient, is both beneficial for the patient and enlightening for the therapist. There is so much we can learn from patients about ourselves and yet, as professionals, we try to separate our work from our private life and pretend that whatever happens during a therapy session does not affect us.

Of course, this is not true. I have encountered many patients who touched a vulnerable part of my soul and changed me. Particularly important are those cases in which I felt I made a contribution to someone's life. Originally, I was going to write a vignette about some of these cases that affected me. Then something happened that changed my mind and made me want to tell a more personal story, a story that gave me a different perspective on my practice, and hopefully will help me become a better practitioner.

I cannot recount how many times I have said to someone suffering from panic attacks: *Just breathe and don't worry about the symptoms you're experiencing; they're perfectly normal. Your body does not recognize whether the fear you experience is from a real danger or not. As a consequence, your body prepares for either fight or flight.* I have always reassured my patients in this way and have always gotten the same response from them: *Yes, what you say makes perfect sense. It's just that when I experience anxiety and panic, I can't think straight!*

A few days ago, I had a patient with a complex problem, and I stayed late to complete my notes. When I eventually finished and was ready to go home, I found myself locked in the building late at night in pitch black darkness with a very low phone battery, and the phone was my only source of light. Of course, my first reaction was that of annoyance. It was very late at night; I had a hard day and just wanted to go home. Not knowing what to do, I eventually texted a few of my colleagues without much hope that anyone would see my messages at that

hour. To my surprise and joy, some of them replied straight away with suggestions. However, this was not before I had the opportunity to have some disturbing thoughts of my own.

I thought about the funny situation I was in and that I would probably have to spend the night there in the building. Annoying, but not too bad after all. Next, I thought that, although I could not get out of the building, no one else could get in. Unless... unless someone else was already in the building with me!

In all the time I had worked there I had never found the lights off (there were lights everywhere in the building) or the front door locked. Then I began to panic. My heart began racing, I could not breathe, and I imagined all the possible things that could happen, as if I were living a horror movie. I was having a real panic attack...the first one in my life. I was having the same experience I had heard my patients relate so many times and that I had counseled them about. Only on this occasion, I did not have control of the situation; I was on the other side. I could not think straight. All the things I told patients to do when they were having panic attacks went out the window. I could not think of anything to do, and did not remember any of my training.

I will not go into any more detail. Suffice it to say I emerged from the building in one piece. Of course, there was no one chasing me with an insane laugh while I ran through the building desperately knocking on closed doors. It was just my imagination. There were no real facts on which to base my fears. But this did not stop my thoughts or my panic.

Moving forward, I think this frightening experience will probably be one of the most valuable lessons of my professional life. It will help me dispel the feeling of superiority of being a professional talking to a patient. This experience has made me realize that I must be humbler when talking to people who suffer and acknowledge the reality of how difficult it is to deal with fear --- however irrational it may appear.



A Closing Thought...

Dr. Benito's powerful vignette reminds us of what has been called "the paradox of healing." A healer heals not because of what he or she does, but because of who he or she is. But to be effective one must be authentic. And how much more authentic are healers who have borne the burden of illness themselves and know the suffering of their patients firsthand? In the healing arts our wounds are transformed into blessings when they enable us to heal others.

—Dr. Boynton, Editor