

Janet Christie-Seely, MD jcseely@uottawa.ca

42 – Physician Heal Thyself and then the World: Workaholism,
Helpaholism and other Physician Conditions (Fraud Syndrome,
Empathopoenia, Email-Overdose, MDeity Syndrome, Cell-phoneOtitis, etc) – Playful but Effective Medications for Serious Symptoms

Janet Christie-Seely, MD, FCFP, Professor of Family Medicine, University of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Family Therapist Most docs are workaholics or helpaholics -- especially Family Docs (1)! I am both. I still run workshops and a psychotherapy practice at 75. I love what I do, that's the problem!

I'm getting better! I read Barbara Killinger's "Workaholics: the Respectable Addicts; a Family Survival Guide" (2), often worse in its impact than alcoholism. Take the Workaholic Quiz at: www.cnn.com/interactive/2011/05/living/workaholic.test/ and find out if your case is serious!

I was fortunate to train with Virginia Satir, the "Columbus of Family Therapy", an enlightened lady way ahead of her time. Stone deaf for two years from mastoiditis at six, she noticed people looked very different when communicating, and planned to become a detective on parents when she grew up. Her mother, a **Placator** never spoke her own feelings, hid anger deep inside, never saying "No!"—like many family docs. Her father was a **Blamer**, hiding his helplessness and shame of alcoholism. Others looked like computers, the **Super-Reasonables** — maybe she met some doctors (specialists particularly) — hiding discomfort about feelings ("Just give me the facts. Don't bother me with this emotional stuff!"), quoting N.E.J.M or the Bible. Others were always joking or changing the subject, the clowns hiding despair, the **Distracters**. She later understood these four came from AND increase Low Self-Esteem (3). So one medication that helps stop the Performance-Based Self-Esteem of most physicians is the prescription of:

Congruence!

I remember being told to be congruent with patients in Med School, but nobody explained how! Congruence is being respectful, considerate and honest. Non-verbal signals match verbal content. If you're angry you may look and sound angry, but you don't blame or accuse, you try to understand the other's position.



Every communication has three components: Self - one's thoughts, feelings and opinions, Other's thoughts, feeling and opinions, and the Context or situation. Picture a peace sign, without the bottom bar, and you have congruence - all three are expressed. When feeling safe and confident (high Self-Esteem), it's easy to be congruent AND it adds to the self-esteem of both parties. For example; "Mrs Smith. I see you are fed up with the side-effects, and I'm getting frustrated with you 'forgetting' the pills, because you really need them. Can we discuss this situation so we get unstuck?"

When you feel insecure or defensive you move to one of those Stances, which make you feel a victim, a jerk, a cold fish or a clown respectively, i.e. you feel even worse about yourself underneath the anger, apologies, quoting of studies or joking. They are "survival stances" as that's how you learned to survive in your family growing up.

Each coping stance ignores part of the picture:



Icebergs

Virginia often said: "The problem's not the problem, it's the coping". What are we coping with? The insecure feelings the problem generates.

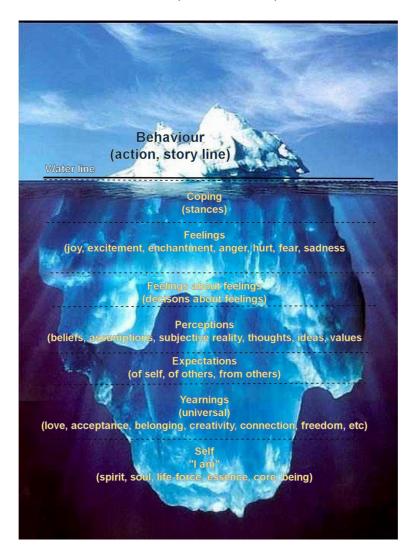
Behaviour is the tip of an iceberg (4) - the only part seen. It pays, especially for physicians to know the other layers. Humans, like icebergs are all unique and beautiful, but the layers under the waterline can be dangerous.

Below Behaviour, determining it, are the Coping Stances described above. Fuelling them are Feelings, especially feeling about ourselves – our Self-Esteem. We developed that from Perceptions of ourselves from childhood experiences. If we came to expect criticism and punishment, that's what we continue to dole out to ourselves -- what we in the Ottawa Satir Learning Centre call our Gremlin (from a wonderful little book: "Taming Your Gremlin:" (5)). The Gremlin loves Negative Self-Talk, and lives in the Expectation or "Should-ing" layer.

First homework: Draw your Gremlin (did he or she just say: "But you can't draw!" – a scowly-face or a cut out tiger from a magazine will do, but it should be visual on a piece of paper). Carry this around for several days, recording anything it says, like: "You're lazy / a fraud / way behind in your journals / etc". Beware; doctors' Gremlins are louder than most! Then, for another week, try elastic band therapy - wear one on your wrist - every time you hear the little fellow give it a flick – not too hard, this is NOT self-punishment! Under the Expectation layer is "Yearnings" – what we really want and need in life –to love and be loved, to be heard, to contribute. How often do you listen to yourself rather than patients? Have you ever talked to the kid inside you who longs to play, paint, dance or research something?

Second homework: dialogue with him or her, with a pen or a pencil in your non-dominant hand for the child. (When I tried I was startled at what I heard – from a three year old whom I'd told was not good enough! She loves painting! www.christie-seely-art.ca). Diving into Yearnings propels you into the Self or "I AM", your spiritual core. Good news! Here, your self-esteem is always high, and you can readily say: "The world is a better place because I am in it!" Try saying that to yourself now – without thinking in terms of your work contributions.

You can also get to Self through meditation, music, art, running – but if you go through the Iceberg you can learn to live there. It will improve your ability to heal the world!



Good luck!

Take home messages

- True self-esteem is independent of performance.
- Congruence raises self-esteem of all concerned.
- Listen to your inner kid, don't berate him / her.
- Satisfy YOUR real needs, THEN help the world.

Original abstract

http://www.woncaeurope.org/content/3798-physician-heal-thyself-and-then-world-workshop-workaholism-helpaholism-and-other

References

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