

Aequanimitas

Jordan Rogers, MD, Class of 2012, Founding Student Editor of HEAL

Strength was my weakness during those days. I had been on a one-way track for such a long time that it never occurred to me to slow down, or even get off the train.

Most doctors don't like to talk about those times when they were vulnerable. It's an unspoken rule that physicians are meant to help everyone around them, while somehow maintaining total inner and outer control of their emotions.

Aequanimitas, a Latin word meaning "calm spirit," used to be what one of my mentors preached over and over in medical school. As a storm may rage on around you, or even within you, you must maintain composure during these toughest of times. Others look up to you for guidance; the climate of the room will always reflect your demeanor.

To a degree, I believe the idea of "aequanimitas" is important. For instance, in the emergency department, if every cantankerous patient, high-stakes procedure, or difficult conversation created a rift in the physician's ability to perform, we couldn't ever get anything done. It is important to keep a level of composure during times of disarray. Nurses, staff, and patients look to us for guidance when they are at their lowest points.

However, when taken to an extreme, this theory can lead to destruction. The summer between my PGY-2 and PGY-3 year, a brief one-week respite was spent at a family event out of state. I was exhausted, emotionally drained, and extremely miserable about the idea of returning to another year of training. What was meant to be a "homecoming" afternoon spent with family turned in to tears in a back room as I cried to my mom. She knew things were hard for me; she perhaps wasn't aware of how hard. I had been keeping all of this from her in an attempt to stay strong and never show weakness. I had bottled up all of my feelings. It was then that my family encouraged me to see a counselor.

Therapy had never occurred to me in all my years of professional training. I always believed that I had to power through whatever challenges I faced. Never mind that both of my parents are

psychologists; their work and mine had no crossover. At least, that is what I had always thought.

When I got back to town I asked around for a local psychologist. After putting off making an appointment for several days, I finally mustered the courage to make a phone call. Driving over to my first meeting, I had the urge to turn the car around over and over again.

Meeting with Marcus was one of the best things that ever happened to me. He had worked with several residents in the past. He told me I was not alone; what I was going through was normal. Any and all emotions that I was experiencing were all things he'd heard before. I finally felt like I wasn't on an island any more. Turns out, lots of people in my exact same position had encountered the exact same range of emotions. Imagine that.

I met with Marcus every few months for the rest of my PGY-3 year. When it was time for us to part, I felt like I had walked a journey through mountains, deserts, and back again. He showed me how to process what I was going through and actions to take in the future to combat feeling low. I often feel Marcus was a gift that I could never replicate, repay, or recreate for anyone else.

We all go through valleys during our training, no matter the environment. It's important to remember that it doesn't have to be a journey made alone. What we do is valuable, meaningful, and impactful to others. It is imperative that we take care of ourselves both inside and out. When our spirit is healthy, aequanimitas is all the more achievable. ■

Dr. Rogers had this to say about HEAL: "HEAL began as a brainstorming session between Drs. Percy, Rodriguez, and myself one afternoon after class. Idea after idea flowed freely and before long we had a full on publication. It had always been a dream of mine to create something similar to the HEAL project, and I am so lucky to have had the creative minds of Drs. Percy and Rodriguez to foster such an amazing project."