

Five Lessons I Learned In My First Year of Medical School

My first year of medical school felt like a mental whirlwind that swept me up in July and spit me back out the following May. It challenged me, and broke me. It rewarded me, and built me. It was the worst and the best, hardest and most fulfilling time I've had thus far in my life. While the material was overflowing, I think I learned some lessons that had nothing to do with neuroanatomy or pharmacokinetics, and I'm still learning every day. In order to preserve the lessons that don't fit into USMLE Step 1 First Aid, like how to avoid crying in public venues when you're exhausted and defeated, I have created this list.

1. Confidence and humility are not mutually exclusive entities.

Being humble and being confident are often presented as opposing ideals. I've lived most of my life stripped of confidence, with a false charade-like display of conviction. My own insecurities prevented me from being *confident*, but they also prevented me from being *humble*. A lot of my energy was spent ensuring everyone liked me or thought I was funny, and I had very little left to dedicate toward real confidence. In medical school, I started to feel that shift. I started to listen to my classmates and hear how smart and kind-hearted they were, and be thankful to know them. I recognized their talents, and gave myself grace to see how I complemented their abilities. I found that I was a lowly first year medical student who knows next to nothing compared to the brilliant and compassionate people I learn from, but I do know how to look at something with fresh eyes, and I do have a genuine love for people that adds something to the relationships I am in.

On my interview day at U of A COM-Phoenix, my dean shared a bit of wisdom with us that I immediately wrote down. I wrote it down because 1) the guy is incredible and I probably would've written anything he said down with such vigor and 2) it was actually amazing advice that I wouldn't fully utilize until I was knee-deep in medical school loathing. He said, "Humility is an incredibly endearing characteristic, and if you don't have it now, we ask that you obtain it before you join our family here." I thought hard about this pearl, and I started noticing humility and confidence around me. Whenever I was drawn to a person, whether it was at school, or in the clinic, or at a restaurant, the person was always displaying humility. Someone who can admit that they are wrong or point out the strengths of another is inherently endearing. It takes confidence to be humble, and to be humble breeds confidence. They work in synergy, taking nothing away from the other, and facilitating each other's growth.

2. Some of the best people you meet have completely different values than you, and that's okay.

I don't know that this lesson is universal for medical students, but it was one I really drove home this year moving to a very different landscape than liberal, homogenous Minnesota. I gave lectures for three years about the importance of diversity and how it strengthens a body of people, but I don't know that I equipped myself for its application until this past year. Arizonans (as a huge generalization) are overall more religious, more conservative, and more opposite of me than I expected—and guess what? They're still wonderful. As a gay student, I had my reservations about befriending religious people. It turns out that my bias toward them outweighed the imaginary ones I assumed they had for me. Some of the best people I met are Mormon, evangelical Christians, Hindu, and

Muslim. Even when I disagree at the core of an issue with another person, I can still learn from and engage with him or her. I can still love and receive love from them. The common humanity I have always preached about is more powerful than I thought. I had to check my preconceived notions at the door, and it wasn't easy, but it was important.

3. Be intentional about who you spend your time with, and what you spend your time doing—especially when you have little time to spare.

Medical school is ridiculously stressful. Period. There is always more to do, and you will always feel like you're slacking, and it is so easy to get wrapped up in how overwhelmed you are. There were some days where I didn't see sunshine (and I live in one of the sunniest state ever). Some days I had only an hour or so to dedicate to something other than school. I was forced to be intentional about how I spent my time, but I think even when we aren't so busy we could learn something from this concept. Think about what you do with your time—is there any way to get more out of life by shifting things around a bit? For instance, I HATE my morning and evening commute, but I HAVE to do it. Instead of zooming through traffic and getting upset (which I definitely occasionally still do—It's a learning *process*, ok?) I started calling old friends or my grandparents on those drives. My mom and I talk every morning on my commute, and it grounds me so much. I get to take the worst part of my day, and turn it into an intentionally structured part of my life that helps maintain my relationships and gives me some motivation from people that lift me up everyday. When I only have a few hours to spare, I also intentionally put down my phone and do something for me. Usually that means going to the gym with my

girlfriend (two birds, one stone), but sometimes it means reading a fun book or watching a stupid Netflix show. Whatever it is, it is time that I allow myself to be mine.

On the flip side of all this feel good stuff you could read in any self-help book ever, there are also some negative people and things that can take away from getting the most out of your time. Some people just bring out the worst in you, and it isn't because they are bad or that you are bad or anything in between. You owe it to yourself to surround yourself with people who get you and make you happy. Being an adult means getting to choose your friends, and there is absolutely no shame in moving on from someone who once added to the positivity in your life but no longer does. Be kind, but be selfish, and understand that there is nothing wrong with ridding yourself of negative people or negative activities in your life. Get off Facebook, put away your phone, skip a workout if it's stressing you out, and for God's sake stop being around people who make you feel guilty.

4. Honestly, you're going to have some terrible days, and you are just going to have to get over it.

One day, I crashed my car into a pole, was late for class, answered every question wrong I was pimped on, and cried in front of my whole small group. It was embarrassing and awful. I felt so incompetent, and I dwelled on it for a few days. I was mortified that people had seen me at my worst. But then, I learned the lesson—it was just a bad day. If my classmates' opinion of me changed, it was probably only temporary, and my dwelling on it was much more devastating than the actual events that took place. I practiced

noticing negative thoughts, and replacing them with awesome ones. I fixed my car, studied the material I failed miserably on, and never cried in class again. When I have bad days now, I make myself call it that—*a bad day*. Nothing more, nothing less.

5. If you can't explain something in simple terms, you don't understand it.

There is nothing noble about using rhetoric to sound smart. Absolutely nothing. Period. I have always believed this, but after a year in graduate level education, I am even more convinced. A scared newly pregnant single mother doesn't care about your \$100,000 vocabulary you bought at your liberal arts college. She doesn't care that you can impress your colleagues with sophisticated language. She cares that you can give meaningful information and human comfort when she has lost hope. She cares that you understand the value of putting a hand on her shoulder while answering her questions with patience. I got the opportunity to see great and awful examples of this from physicians. The good ones changed patients' lives in the best ways; the bad ones abandoned their patients in a sea of confusing terminology and smug arrogance.

I made this list to remind myself of the things I learned that won't improve my test scores or give me an edge up on Match Day, but that will give me an edge up in life. If happiness is a worthwhile destination, then I think these 5 lessons are a part of the journey to get there. I am not done learning yet-- fortunately I never will be. I can honestly say that I am a better version of myself than I was a year ago, and that beats acing any test or mastering any concept from a text book.