Lessons From Our Learners

Editor’s Note: Submissions to this column may be in the form of papers, essays, poetry, or other similar forms. Editorial assistance will be provided to develop early concepts or drafts. If you have a potential submission or idea, or if you would like reactions to a document in progress, contact the series editor directly: William D. Grant, EdD, SUNY Upstate Medical University, Department of Family Medicine, 475 Irving Avenue, Suite 200, Syracuse, NY 13210. 315-464-6997. Fax: 315-464-6982. grantw@upstate.edu.

Building Closeness, Understanding, and Tolerance Among Residents: The Family Genogram

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“We need a residency retreat, Dr Z,” suggested a chief resident after returning from the American Academy of Family Physicians Chief Resident Leadership Development Program Workshop. The workshop stimulated his interest in ways of improving the relationships among his fellow residents. As the behavioral scientist in the program, I wholeheartedly agreed that an all-resident weekend retreat without the medical faculty could address and potentially resolve some of the conflicts and distance among residents. A retreat that also involved spouses and significant others could also help strengthen some of the stressed couple relationships.

The chief residents presented me with a group exercise inspired from their leadership conference, but they wanted an “ice breaker” activity that would help build closeness. Pressure was on this behavioral scientist. Fortunately I participate in the Southern California Behavioral Science Consortium, a group of behavioral scientists who meet quarterly and share activities used in their respective programs. I recalled one director’s reported success in his residency orientation program with the sharing of family genograms.

I had reservations, however, and wondered if the activity might be too personal as the first activity on our very first retreat. Besides, it took the residents about 2 years to become comfortable when Balint sessions were introduced into the curriculum. I couldn’t think of any other activity so I planned accordingly.

As the retreat approached, residents excitedly asked, “What do you have in store for our retreat, Dr Z?” “Oh, get ready,” I said, “I’m thinking.” Anxious laughter filled our Balint session. My own anxiety surged as I sensed their expectations. I thought to myself: What if the genogram “bombs” and everyone is finished within 30 minutes? I remembered “Show and Tell” from grade school where students brought something from home to share with classmates. The activity could certainly fill another 30 to 60 minutes. The week before the retreat, I gave residents the following instructions: “I want you all to go home and look around and find something of meaning to bring with you on this retreat. Don’t share any of your choices with anyone, including your significant other if he/she is coming. Tell your wives, husbands, boyfriends, and whomever that they need to do the same thing. If they have any questions, call me, but it’s important that everyone participate.”

The day of the retreat arrived; 19 residents and five spouses/significant others gathered in the facility’s conference room. I handed each participant a 30 inch x 24 inch sheet of paper and large magic markers. “With these sheets of paper, I want you to draw your own family genogram.” “How many generations of family should we draw?” residents asked. “Draw and tell as much about your family as you feel

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comfortable with,” I answered. They all began drawing immediately. Laughter soon filled the room. Requests for extra sheets of paper as well as questions clarifying “How do you show divorce?” and “What about if someone is dis- owned from their family?” Spouses and significant others were as involved as the residents and were assisted by their partners and other residents if they had trouble constructing their own genograms.

Once the genograms were completed, I reviewed my own, hoping to lessen any anxiety. I should have known from their constructive questions that they were prepared to tell all. One by one, residents, spouses, and significant others took their turn without hesitation in sharing their family histories and often airing the “dirty laundry.” Stories were shared of battles between parents and in-laws, medical and mental illnesses, incarcerations, and experiences as refugees. The Show and Tell exercise added greater depth to the genograms. Pictures of family and loved ones were proudly displayed. One spouse smuggled out against his wife’s wishes their wedding album that he proudly displayed as one of the most significant moments in his life. Another husband held a CD that he played during his wife’s busy times through her medical school application process, medical school training, study time for Boards, and clerkships. Tears, laughter, and many sentimental “Ahs’” filled the room as stories and memorabilia were shared.

An unforgettable item was a small white mug encased in a glass box. The resident shared, “I almost didn’t bring this cup, but as I left my apartment, it just seemed to call out to me as the most special item I could share. This is the mug that belonged to my great-great grandfather, Frank Clark, who was a slave.” She explained the mug originally belonged to the owner of the plantation. Her great-great grandfather had used the mug to shave “Master,” the common name used for the owner of the plantation. It was at the end of the Civil War when her great-great grandfather was given the mug from his master and told, “Take this cup as it symbolizes your freedom.” The resident explained years later how the mug was passed down from generation to generation to a special family member who achieved great things. From her great-great grandfather, the mug was passed to her great grandfather, Charlie Clark, after he witnessed his father’s murder and lynching by the Klu Klux Klan in Arkansas. Then the mug was passed to her father, Charles Hill, JD, PhD, and now to her as she completed her medical school program. As the new holder of “the cup,” she explained how inspired she felt on a daily basis to continue her aspirations through her ancestors who paved the way and gained their freedom to allow her to reach such high goals. It turned into quite an emotional and moving experience for the resident, as well as all those with whom she shared this amazing story.

This 2-hour genogram exercise became a 4-and-a-half hour session. Residents didn’t want to stop until everyone had their turn. The genogram’s success was evident from several sources. Behaviorally, I noticed interactions and conver-