You Can Take Time Away

As I read the *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services*’ May 2018 editorial (Shattell, 2018), I thought the message was on point. Getting away from work to travel and vacation is important to our mental health; however, this was not realistic for me. I made note of the recommendation and tucked it away for the future when a vacation would be a possibility. I used to travel, and hoped to again, when my absence could be more easily accommodated. I have a clinical practice, coordinate a psychiatric–mental health nurse practitioner program, and have four young children at home. Clearly, my presence is imperative.

But the longing for downtime continued, and when my sister offered me an opportunity to travel with her to Alaska, I could not shake the need to go. However, anxiety surged whenever I thought about leaving: “I can’t put my responsibilities on my ‘already busy’ colleagues,” or “I shouldn’t leave my children for a long trip; for a trip that isn’t ‘necessary.’” It was during one of these moments that the nurse psychotherapist inside my head noticed the abundance of can’t and shouldn’t statements. I knew I needed to evaluate my current thoughts and possibly my underlying beliefs.

Automatic thoughts typically are based somewhat in truth (Beck, 2011), so I had to examine the evidence for and against my thought that a vacation at this time was not possible. The evidence to support my thinking was easy to gather. But it took more effort to explore the contrary—how could I make this happen? How could I plan a trip even though my first instinct was “I’m too busy?” Some of these thoughts helped: “Summer semester is a lighter teaching and service load”; “The kids have done fine when I’ve been gone for work trips”; and “If necessary, I can put in extra time before and after the trip to prevent overloading colleagues.” The more I looked for evidence to the contrary—evidence that I could work it out—the more my sister’s offer to travel became realistic.

The next step was to decatastrophize (Beck, 2011). I had to ask myself, “What is the worst thing that could happen if I am gone for 10 days?” Although not many devastating academic or clinical endings came to mind, I did think of some worst-case scenarios with my family. I had to quickly remember to also consider the possible best outcomes. What if my lack of work–life balance was self-imposed and physically and psychologically harmful (Shattell, 2017)? I began to consider how downtime from work and family responsibilities is restorative (Zijlstra & Sonnentag, 2006), and that I might in fact need restoration. What if this vacation helps me reset, physically and psychologically, so I become happier, healthier, and more engaged in my work and family? And maybe, just maybe, I could also consider the tremendous fun I would have on a once-in-a-lifetime vacation with my sister.

If a colleague were to ask me if they should take this needed vacation, my answer would be emphatically “Yes!” This “distancing question” (Beck, 2011, p. 175) was the clincher for me, so I got up the courage to officially ask for this time off. My associate dean’s immediate response was “Absolutely. And make sure you take a long enough trip to truly unplug. It usually takes a few days to stop thinking about work. Don’t bring your laptop.” In hindsight, I wondered why I was so worried about being judged when I asked to use my vacation time. But I realized that not everyone can afford this luxury, because the benefits of vacations can fade quickly when organizational support and job security are not perceived by the employee (Reizer & Mey-Raz, 2018).

This was not the first time I had contemplated the need to unplug. I had read the results from a survey that...
found only one of four Americans took their full vacation days from work (Glassdoor Team, 2014). I wonder now if instead of seeing a startling problem in that statistic, I saw normalization of my situation. Therefore, I accepted the decision that 7 years was too long to go without truly unplugging, and the world would keep spinning if I took a break. I had been on a few family trips, but not a vacation. This was going to be my behavioral experiment, to use cognitive behavioral language.

I know what I do for students and patients is important; what I do for my own children is even more important. But when I overvalue my importance to others while undervaluing my importance to myself, then something needs to change.

REFERENCES

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