Teaching, Learning, and the Quest for Well-Being: Psychiatrists as Physician-Educators

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Psychiatrists view the world with a peculiar and particular vision; peculiar enough to appear mysterious, dangerous, or worthy of ridicule (thus the reason for psychiatrist jokes and the ever present psychiatric couch in newspaper cartoons); particular enough to provide a unique perspective that other caregivers find valuable and worthy. Psychiatrists focus on what makes us human, what makes us suffer, and what makes us thrive. Colleagues seek psychiatrists’ guidance when family members succumb to psychiatric disorders or when patients present with challenging behaviors. Furthermore, by focusing on the development of the brain and neuroscience, along with how humans adapt to a constantly changing complex environment, psychiatrists have something to teach other clinicians. That peculiar and particular vision seems to help clinicians to help others.

Our brains, the focus of psychiatrists, are matter that makes computations in the context of personal narratives. New information comes in and gets integrated with existing information—a Bayesian dance of interpreting new information along with our automatic update of new probabilities. That’s how we all learn. The drive to learn is strong, and there is so much to learn constantly. The Bayesian dance allows us to adapt by revising how we understand the world. As we learn, we grow.

Carol Ryff from the University of Wisconsin has defined what it means to have a psychologic well-being. She found that six orthogonal aspects comprise well-being: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. By personal growth, she means: “Has a feeling of continued development; sees self as growing and expanding; is open to new experiences; has sense of realizing his or her potential; sees improvement in self and behavior over time; is changing in ways that reflect more self-knowledge and effectiveness.”

Remarkably, Ryff found that greater psychologic well-being was associated with lower allostatic load (the wear and tear on one’s body) and longer life. She also found the converse—lower psychologic well-being was associated with shorter life.

In this issue of Psychiatric Annals, Drs. Lorenzo Norris and Eindra Khin Khin and their team of contributors show mental health clinicians how to teach and by doing so, how to learn and grow (and even have yet another purpose in life). So go forth and teach and live long and prosper.

REFERENCE