

RESILIENCE STORIES

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"DON'T PULL A SKIP!" PREVENTION ALWAYS TRUMPS REHAB

By Donald G. "Skip" Mondgradon, MD, FACP

What Happened?

On April 17, 2014, I arrived early to my office at Eisenhower Army Medical Center, on Fort Gordon, Georgia, before anyone else on the floor. I unlocked the door, turned on the lights, and put my lunch away in my secretary's office. Like thousands of days before, I unlocked my office and stepped inside. Then, I turned off the lights, locked the door, closed the blinds, turned off my phones, and curled up under my desk in a fetal position. I began to ask myself, "Skip, what are you doing?" "Skip, what happened?" "Skip, how did you get here?" For four hours I wrestled with these questions. Slowly, I began to put the pieces together. For nine months I struggled with a progressive blue mood, insomnia, anhedonia, negative ruminations, impaired cognition, a loss of confidence, indecision, anxiety, withdrawal, a sense of aloneness, heightened aches and pains from my osteoarthritis, and a loss of libido. Finally, after laying on the musty carpet for four hours, I admitted, "Skip, you're depressed, go get help!" This wasn't supposed to happen to a tough guy like me--a Colonel, Chief of the Department of Medicine, twenty-five years in the Army, deployed for thirty-seven months, thirty of those months in combat zones, and a National Wrestling Champion. What happened? I failed to take care of myself while I was taking care of everybody else. I failed to monitor my emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual energy stores. I was utterly depleted. I was depressed. During my recovery, I learned some valuable lessons. Let me share a few of these with you.

Go Back to the Basics

Don't pull a Skip! Be vigilant. Monitor and replenish your energy stores. Start by going back to the basics. Inventory your BIG 3, sleep, nutrition, and exercise. These three were essential to my recovery, health, and well-being. They are also essential to your health and wellness. The demands as a physician, parent, and child of aging parents can disrupt our sleep. They can also make us prone to skimp on our sleep. What's the most important thing to improve your health and well-being and fortify yourself against a mental health breakdown? It's to zealously guard your sleep. Start by trying to go to bed and get up at the same time each day, schedule permitting. Also, turn off all screens an hour before bedtime and keep your room as dark, cool, and quiet as possible. Eat healthy fats, such as salmon, sardines, avocado, and walnuts. Get your greens and super foods like broccoli and blueberries regularly. I tell my patients, if it's good for the body, it's good for the brain. If it's bad for the body, it's bad for the brain. Incorporate exercise into your day. Park farther away, climb the steps instead of using the elevator, and incorporate the Big 3 exercises. The Big 3 use the largest muscle groups in your body and give you the biggest results in the least amount of time. The Big 3 are a push (pushup, bench or dumbbell press, or resistance band press), a pull (row with resistance bands, dumbbell, a barbell, or machine, lat pulldown, or chin-up), and a squat (bodyweight, resistance band, dumbbell, barbell, or leg press). Even when you're under a time crunch you can target a push, pull, and squat routine for 10-15 minutes, three times a week. Do these exercises, one set after another, without rest for some added aerobic benefit. Exercise will help you sleep better, think better, and feel better. Remember, prevention always trumps rehab.

Laughter is Good Medicine

Don't pull a Skip! Don't take yourself so seriously. I wrote the prescription, "Proverbs 17:22" for thousands and thousands of patients. I told them to take this medicine liberally each and every day. I instructed them, "This medication has no bad side effects. It has no drug-to-drug interactions. And, you cannot overdose on it. Each and every day, you must laugh and laugh liberally." Proverbs 17:22 says, "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine, but a broken spirit drieth up the bones." I forgot to take my own medicine. As I sank into the deep dark despair of depression, my spirit was broken. I forgot to laugh. I missed out on all the benefits of laughter. Laughter relieves stress and anxiety, re-energizes you, clears your mind, enhances your focus, problem-solving ability, and creativity, increases your immunity, lowers your cortisol, improves healing, and lowers your blood pressure. Laughter is indeed good medicine. It's also contagious. It makes you and those around you feel better. Tell a good joke, recall a funny anecdote, watch a goofy movie, or look at old pictures. Call a family member or friend and tell them, "Remember when....", and share a good laugh. Prevention always trumps rehab. Take your medicine and laugh liberally each and every day. Doctor's orders.

Gratitude, the Antidote to Negative Thoughts

Don't pull a Skip! Don't let your mind be poisoned by negative thoughts. During my depression, day and night, I was pummeled by negative ruminations. "You're a fake." "You don't deserve to be a Colonel." "You let the Army down." "You let your family down!" "Who's going to want to hire you?" Gratitude is a great antidote for the self-absorption, self-deception, and self-loathing of depression. Gratitude also has the health benefits of improved immunity, healing, and cognition, stress relief, and lowered cortisol and blood pressure. I challenge you to get a notebook and jot down three things you're grateful for every night before bedtime. Note why you're grateful for them. Better yet, share them with someone. As physicians, we deal with tragedy, pain, death, and dying regularly. Think of the wonder, joy, and fulfillment our families, friends, faith, and patients bring into our lives. Consider the marvels of nature, the simple pleasures of life, and miraculous gift of life. We have so much to be grateful for. Don't allow yourself to be beat down and beat up by negative thoughts. Be grateful. After all, what you appreciate, appreciates. Remember, prevention always trumps rehab. I found the above practices were essential to my restoration and my ongoing health and well-being. I know they will also benefit you. I hope and pray you'll monitor and replenish your mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual energy stores. You don't want to pull a Skip. You don't want to find yourself curled up under your desk in a fetal position.



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He's the proud father of five independent and gainfully employed children and grandfather of four wonderful grandchildren. His crowning glory, however, is his forty-year marriage to his fellow author and adventurer in life, Sherry.