

Not Just Another Code

It's week 7 of 8 of my rotation in the emergency department. I hear the familiar ambulance call over the radio down the hall. "CPR in progress. Three rounds of epinephrine so far." I rush to the med room to grab the code box with the ACLS medications. I'm going through my mental checklist when my preceptor walks in. "Are you ready for this?" he asks. I repeat back to him what I heard them say over the radio, thinking it's the same as any other code I've attended.

"It's a 7-month-old."

Oh. That changes everything.

I haven't attended a pediatric code before, and I take a deep breath and listen to my preceptor's advice as we wait for EMS to arrive. Although I am a little shaky drawing up the medications, I am able to focus on the tasks in front of me throughout the code. Eventually, the mood in the room shifts as the team runs out of ideas and options. We hear the anguished cry of the child's father from the other room as someone tells him the news. It is heartbreaking to realize that this will be the worst day of his life and that we couldn't prevent it.

I have brought our supplies back to the med room. I'm moving slowly and trying to stay calm, but am having trouble processing even the most basic things. My preceptor tells me to take a break. As I walk away from the room and out of the department, I let myself release the tears I've been holding in. I don't know if I'm crying for the father, the child, the medical team, or myself. I'm not even sure whether they are tears of sadness or frustration.

We are trained to take care of people. Clinical pharmacists improve patient outcomes, don't you know?! However, sometimes outcomes don't improve, and as clinical pharmacists, we will have patients whose passing affects us deeply, whether they are in our lives for moments or years. This can be a novel experience for many of us as new practitioners because we are used to being the strong ones who hold the others up. However, despite being difficult, it is important to embrace and pay respect to our own emotions, especially grief.

As resident pharmacists, we may find it particularly challenging to give ourselves the time and headspace to cope with strong emotions. I was fortunate that my preceptor took the time that day to share his perspective on coping with losing a pediatric patient. This helped me process some of my own feelings of self-doubt and concern about whether we did enough. There were probably a dozen other tasks that my preceptor had planned to do that day, but I'm grateful for the example he provided. It was important for our own health and for the safety of the patients we cared for the rest of that day to take some time to process what we had just experienced.

Despite the benefit of the debriefing with my preceptor, however, the grief stuck with me. Like most pharmacists, I'm prone to perfectionism. I have high expectations, and when those are not met, I tend to criticize myself. When grieving, we should not judge ourselves for our reactions and emotions. If losing a patient makes you cry, you are not weak. If losing a patient does not make you cry, you are not cold-hearted. Give yourself permission to feel what you feel, but try to stay focused on treating each patient to the best of your ability.

One cannot watch life be stripped away from a 7-month-old and think that they are guaranteed a long, healthy life. Take some time to focus on the most important relationships in your life, whether they involve your family, your pets, your spirituality, or your hobbies. By prioritizing these important parts of our lives, we can find gratitude for our blessings and support for our concerns. If you are not finding the support you need, be sure to seek out additional help. Most hospitals have programs in place to support members of the team, especially after events like this. **The world needs healthy health care providers. By taking care of ourselves, we can better take care of the patients who need our support.**

About the author: Louisa Sullivan is a first-year resident at Dignity Health St. Joseph's Medical Center in Stockton, California. She is passionate about critical care, emergency medicine, teaching, and advancing the role of pharmacists. When she's not nerding-out about pharmacy, you'll likely find her with her nose in a book or traveling somewhere exotic.

Addendum: The recent loss of a fellow PGY1, Dr. Dayna Less, in Chicago has surely affected all of us as recent graduates and trainees. For me, it has highlighted the importance of not only taking care of myself but also of cherishing every moment. Each day is a gift.