

WANT TO BE HAPPIER  
WITH YOUR LIFE?

# Change the way you think about it

BY LINDA PICONE

**D**avid Frenz, MD, medical director for Addiction Medicine at Allina Health, has worked with a lot of unhappy people—including many physicians. So, he’s pretty much heard it all: the electronic medical record, the insurance paperwork, the miserable hours and ungrateful patients and increasing expectations placed on physicians. No wonder so many are burned out, right?

Maybe not.

“The fantasy that frontline providers have is that if they could just fix the environment, everything would be better,” says Frenz. “But if you’re an emergency medicine physician, guess what, you’re going to work crummy hours into the middle of the night, people are going to die despite your best efforts, you may even get sued every so often. We can’t change those things; the only thing we can change is you.

“That’s a difficult message to deliver, but, in my experience, it’s the right message to deliver.”

Frenz points to the work of the spiritual teacher and author Eckhart Tolle in his 1997 book, *The Power of Now*:

*“Wherever you are, be there totally. If you find your here and now intolerable and it makes you unhappy, you have three options: remove yourself from the situation, change it or accept it totally. If you want to take responsibility for your life, you must choose one of those three options, and you must choose now. Then accept the consequences. No excuses. No negativity. No psychic pollution. Keep your inner space clear.”*



When counseling patients, Frenz asks them which of the choices—leave, change things or accept—they like. “Patients often say they don’t like any of the choices, so I ask them for a sane fourth choice,” he says. “In over a decade, I’ve never gotten one. They’ve got choices—they just don’t like them.”

Physicians will rarely take the option of removing themselves from a situation they find stressful, Frenz says. Sometimes they may look at ways to change their situation: “Can you improve your EHR skills and workflows? Hire a scribe? Work less than full-time?”

But, he says, “you will be less distressed if, in fact, you accept the situation totally.”

Frenz compares practicing medicine as being, in some important ways, similar to being in the military. “The military sends people into dangerous places to do dangerous jobs and they realize that you can’t really modify the environment,” he says. “The only thing you can modify is the individual.”

It’s easy, in a way, to point to health system administration, or “evil” insurance companies, Frenz says, to complain about the very real barriers and frustrations in the work a physician does. But those complaints don’t help you feel better—they just make you feel worse.

“The feet walk, the mind wanders; change what you’re telling yourself or bring yourself back to the present. A lot of it is just skill-building. Once you have the insight that you’re causing a lot of your own misery, it just comes down to consistent practice.”

– David Frenz, MD

“What are you telling yourself about your work that disturbs you?” he asks. “If you’re sitting in front of Epic all frustrated, it’s that non-acceptance of your situation that creates the negative emotions. This goes all the way back to the Stoic philosophers and is the core of modern cognitive behavioral therapy [CBT]. It’s also the message of ‘Acceptance Was the Answer.’

arguably the most famous chapter in the ‘Big Book’ of Alcoholics Anonymous—which, not coincidentally, was written by a physician who had some major struggles.”

Frenz remembers being “kind of depressed” as a resident, when he’d hear mid-career physicians talk about how much they hated what they were doing—and checking the stock market every day to see if they could retire early. “Physicians acquire a lot of really bad beliefs over the course of the training cycle and during their careers. Those beliefs will continue to produce disturbed emotions.”

Modifying the individual—yourself—requires personal responsibility, Frenz says. “You have to examine your beliefs. Your beliefs about your job produce your associated emotions and behaviors—this is straight-up CBT. Ninety percent of the time, your feelings and actions are the result of your beliefs. The other 10 percent is just instinct.”

He sometimes goes through what he calls “silly examples” with patients: “Let’s imagine a Vikings-Packers game. Aaron Rogers throws a touchdown pass. Why is half the stadium happy and half upset? The only explanation is that people come with very different beliefs about the same event.”

If you’re not ready to leave the practice of medicine, or to change jobs, and you’ve done what you can to change some of the things that frustrate you but still spend more time than you’d like in your EHR or calling insurance companies, how can you get to the point of accepting your situation?

“The feet walk, the mind wanders; change what you’re telling yourself or bring yourself back to the present,” Frenz says. “A lot of it is just skill-building. Once you have the insight that you’re causing a lot of your own misery, it just comes down to consistent practice.”

Two things are important to this practice:

- *Change what you are telling yourself about your work and its frustrations.* Remind

yourself, deliberately, of why you do what you do. Do you love helping your patients? Enjoy solving the complex mystery of an illness? Enjoy the freedom to do things your salary may allow you?

- *Be present in what you are doing now, right this moment, not in issues of the past or worries about the future.* For many people, this means deliberately focusing on breathing in and out or learning mindfulness. “The psychologist Dan Gilbert has spent his career studying happiness,” Frenz says. “He found that if you’re present now, you’re likely to be happy.” In *Stumbling on Happiness*, Gilbert says—as does Frenz—that happiness comes from within, not from what happens to us, so you can be happy, or at least content, with almost any situation if you decide to be. **MM**

Linda Picone is editor of *Minnesota Medicine*.



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