

Becoming a Better Health-Care Provider

By Marilyn Tran



illustration by Brother Phap Ban

I remember being a fourth-year intern as a naturopathic medical student and seeing my own patients for the first time. No doubt, it was an intimidating experience—if not for others, definitely for me.

Of course, the school did their best to make the process as smooth as possible. I began shadowing in my third year, sitting in on visits led by the fourth-year interns, and when those fourth-year students graduated, these patients fell under my care. Since I had already grown accustomed to these patients, it was easy for me to continue building already established relationships.

With the new patients, I began to notice my discomfort. Usually, my first thoughts revolved around how the patient would perceive me: “What will they think of me? Will they like my treatment plan? Am I going to be able to help them?”

Then, during visits with other patients, I would sometimes feel a blockage. I found myself not able to express what I really wanted to express. Eventually, I realized these patients had particular traits that reminded me of people in my own life. As a consequence, I found myself reacting to them in ways similar to how I would react to the people in my life.

Perhaps the most discomforting realization came to me when I sat with and tried to counsel a patient who was experiencing difficulties in her romantic relationship. Suddenly, I thought, “Wow! I need to apply this to myself. How can I be giving advice when I haven’t even applied it to myself?”

This realization, along with the knowledge that most physical complaints have a connection to mental and emotional imbalances, gave me the resolve to figure out and heal my own insecurities, poor attachment patterns, and childhood wounds. I believed I could take my patients only as far as I had gone myself. Thus entered mindfulness.

Bringing Mindfulness into My Professional Practice

Without a doubt, nurturing my mindfulness practice has made me a better health-care practitioner in countless ways. The most

obvious benefit is that I can share and teach mindfulness skills and techniques to my patients, thus providing effective tools that lead to positive outcomes.

For example, a topic that comes up often in discussions with my patients is letting go of what is not in our control. An important aspect of mindfulness practice is to accept that we cannot control the thoughts, emotions, and actions of those around us. The only control we have is in choosing how to respond to others. Herein lies another lesson: we can choose to “respond” as opposed to “react.” The difference? When we are responding, there is a pause between the stimulus and our action. This pause allows us to assess the situation more clearly and with more insight, usually leading to a more skillful action. Reacting, on the other hand, is automatic and uncontrolled. Patients who choose to adopt this practice of pausing before acting share that they feel less frustrated and more aware of their own thoughts and feelings, which allows them to act more calmly and skillfully.

This practice frees me from my own insecurities around working with patients. Rather than focusing my thoughts on what they think of my practice, I instead direct my energy towards giving them the best service possible and feeling good about it. Their opinions about whether or not my services are appreciated are outside of my control. Therefore, there is no point in being apprehensive or obsessing. With this now liberated energy, I am able to add even more value to my services.

Being Fully Present

A cornerstone of mindfulness practice is to stay in the present moment without judgment. It is a seemingly simple practice, yet so powerful. When I am fully present and engaged with my patients, it leads to much deeper and more productive sessions. Why? I am able to see the root of the patient’s issues much more quickly, instead of being distracted by my own thoughts, details that do not really matter, or minor issues.

I also believe patients feel and know when practitioners are truly present. When I am truly present, I provide a safer space for them to share and feel heard without feeling judged. My patients