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# Physician Traps

Some Practical Ways to Avoid Becoming a Miserable Doctor

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## Introduction

You would think doctors would be happy. Most of us are relatively wealthy. People look up to us. Most of those we serve are grateful; they don't sue us nearly as often as they could. Because of the skills and opportunities we bring to their tables, our colleagues cut us a lot of slack, and they overlook behavior they would never tolerate in others. We occupy positions of power and influence in our health care institutions. Relatively independent even when we are employed by organizations, good jobs are still easy to find and leave. Satisfaction and a deep sense of meaning are always within reach. What an awesome privilege it is to be physician!

Yet, even with our independence, privilege and expensive toys, many of us are miserable. Our lounges and lunch rooms are among the most negative places on the planet. Many of us say we wouldn't go into medicine again. Most of us recommend that our children choose another career. We rant and ruminate and look past all we have, thinking only of what we want. Having no significant problems to speak of, we view mere annoyances as heavy burdens. We make ourselves miserable and then complain about being so miserable.

The destructive perceptions, attitudes and behaviors that render privileged people wretched are temptations for everyone, but because of the position you enjoy as a physician, you are especially vulnerable. Knowing these traps are out there will encourage you to remain vigilant. When you drift into one of these emotional riptides, the recovery strategies described here will enable you to save yourself before all hope is lost.

## Avoid the seduction of materialism

Many of your colleagues will choose to live right on the edge of their means. They will build castles, drive fancy cars, pursue expensive hobbies and take luxurious vacations—even when they cannot afford them. Seeing this, you may start to feel left out. After all, you work just as hard as they do. Why shouldn't you have nice stuff too?

If you fall for the illusion that more and better stuff will make you happy, your work will cease to be a mission. Your practice will become a means to an end. You will start to cut corners, and the quality of your service will deteriorate. You will feel compelled to provide only those services that bring in the most money, and the crushing financial consequences of your misguided pursuit will drive you to do more while enjoying it less. You will start to resent your colleagues who are more highly paid, and

you will look for investments that will provide the means you believe you deserve. When these investments turn sour, you will become even more resentful that insurers are not making up your losses. What might have been a joyful service to others will become a maddening drudgery.

Leave the desperate quest of material things to others. Make the decision to live below your means, and then stick to it. Give yourself the freedom to give some of your services away. Make purchasing decisions based on quality instead of ostentation. Remind yourself regularly of the things you can do without. Pay cash. Build and nourish friendships with people who share your values, and avoid the shallow types who care mostly about their perceived status and social rank.

## Suppress the urge to flaunt your power

Power is the great personality amplifier. The unrestricted license to practice medicine gives you the power to allocate precious resources responsibly or wastefully. Your professional standing at the head of the health care pecking order will permit you to lead by example or to play the tyrant. Your advanced education will enable you to facilitate team learning or to intimidate others into cowering hesitancy. There is no clearer measure of a person's character than her use of power.

Character-flawed physicians throw their weight around. They are always looking for more power to abuse. They throw fits when things don't go their way. They embarrass others publicly instead of confronting them privately and respectfully. They bring up troubling issues in public meetings instead of trying to solve the problem behind the scenes. Fearful that others will realize how impotent they are, they strut and preen, constantly seeing reassurance that they are people of substance. Never entirely convinced, they lead lives of disconsolation, torturing themselves and annoying others.

## There is no clearer measure of a person's character than her use of power.

Your power as a physician is most effective when restrained instead of displayed, minimized instead of flaunted. Listen carefully to others, and ask clarifying questions instead of barging in with your views. Ask for help instead of ordering others around. Invite your colleagues' suggestions about how to proceed with difficult clinical problems; they will often have a

better idea. Use your power to influence and persuade, not to berate, bully or demean. The most effective physician leaders seek influence instead of power.

## Resist the tendency to settle

Many of the experiences in your professional life will incline you to settle. Pressured by time constraints, most of your colleagues will start to cut corners on their histories and physical exams. They will dictate observations never made, put off their chart completions and finally dictate medical boilerplate since they can no longer recall what actually happened with their patients. They will depend on assistants to do the work they should be doing themselves, look to drug salespeople for continuing education and slack off in a thousand other ways that separate the best physicians from the rest. Medicine is like life; sadly, mediocrity rules.

Physicians who abandon the pursuit of excellence for the easier life of mediocrity miss most of the joy of medicine. They cannot afford the time to discuss interesting cases or review the latest literature. These harried physicians rush from patient to patient, hoping family members won't be there to slow them down with questions, then rush to the physicians' lounge to waste precious time catching up on the latest gossip or immersing themselves in entertaining grousing. The practice of medicine becomes a list of daily tasks instead of a vocation. It's not as hard, but it's not as satisfying either.

Embrace excellence as a guiding value early in your career, and conduct your life accordingly. Recognize the practical implications of this decision. You will not make as much money as your less conscientious colleagues. You will come in earlier, stay later and waste less time on the frivolous distractions that appear to mean so much to your less-driven colleagues. You will attend to details that others ignore, concentrate while colleagues daydream and force yourself to learn new skills while fellow physicians rust. You will feel compelled to consume less and produce more. Your colleagues will suggest that you relax and have some fun; you will smile and nod, recognizing that they have confused pleasure with joy and mistaken relaxation and comfort for peace and satisfaction.

## Fight the inclination to coast

When you have finished your training and passed your board exams, it will be tempting to coast downhill from there. Many of us do. With no more formal tests to take for awhile, the incentive to push yourself into the uncomfortable zone of real learning diminishes

for all and disappears entirely for some. You will tend to fill your days with tasks that come easily and naturally. You will start to specialize in doing what you like to do, and to avoid tasks and commitments that demand significant effort. Motivation, like water running downhill, seeks the course of least resistance.

Physicians who start to coast are easily irritated by the disturbing currents of continuous change. They have lost interest in active rowing. They long for the days when things were easier and less stressful. They fail to realize that their hesitancy to engage is the source of their distress. They blame others, sure that their discomfort is someone else's fault. They resent younger colleagues who are "taking over," bringing in new perspectives, challenging the status quo and suggesting better ways of doing things. Once they start to drift, it is only when they are coasting that they are relatively comfortable. But it is only possible to coast when one is going downhill.

### **Motivation, like water running downhill, seeks the course of least resistance.**

Resist the tendency to let things slide by taking on new challenges regularly—challenges that require you to stretch. Pursue a graduate degree in business administration or some other field. Take on new commitments that require you to master unfamiliar material or to develop and hone new skills. Stay engaged in a special project continuously. Set personal goals that are hard to achieve, then set harder ones when you achieve them. The discomfort you will create by forcing yourself to grow is much easier to tolerate than the chronic resentment you will feel when others won't leave you alone to circle in stagnant eddies.

## Quit being so cynical

A certain amount of cynicism will serve you well. The newest drugs will probably not turn out to be as wonderful as the company says. Sustained organizational change will not occur as quickly or easily as that new MBA claims. And the latest electronic medical record will probably not eliminate all medication errors. But excessive cynicism will transform you into a miserable cuss, a sour evangelist for the gospel of hopelessness, a negative influence no one wants to be around. Cynicism is the chlorine of organizational life. The right amount decreases the BS to tolerable levels; too much creates such a hostile environment that even good ideas have no chance for survival.

If you adopt cynicism as your prevailing world view, you will enjoy neither your career in medicine, nor your life. You will stop believing in anything or anybody. You will attach nefarious motives to others' actions, and remain convinced that others' efforts and overtures are halfhearted or insincere. You will expect your patients to continue their unhealthy behaviors, so you will see little point in counseling or encouraging them. Worst of all, your world will increasingly conform to your expectations. You will conclude that your cynicism was justified, but that smug satisfaction will provide cold comfort when you reflect back on your disappointing life.

How can you avoid this bitter fate? Identify your cynical colleagues, and stay away from them. Look for the good in others, and focus on their strengths instead of their shortcomings. Write several thank you notes each week to people whose kindness and persistence have inspired you. Throw your lot in with people who are trying to make a difference. Celebrate small successes and learn from big failures. Never stop believing in yourself and others. Expectations are powerful catalysts for change. Choose to remain hopeful.

## Abandon arrogance as a defense

Arrogance provides little cover for your obvious shortcomings, and it endears you to no one. Because haughty attitudes and behaviors are not helpful in getting along in life, arrogance is always a defense against feelings of inferiority. Only those people who feel threatened are arrogant; positive, self-confident people feel no need to think or act that way. Arrogance is the favorite defense of physicians and others of modest social standing because it is easy to employ, and because those subjected to it are not likely to point out what fools these people are—at least not to their faces. If you use arrogance as a way to feel temporarily superior, you can be sure that the objects of your disdain will ridicule you behind your back.

Because you have seen so many physicians act this way, you may have mistakenly concluded that arrogance is the mark of a good physician. Nothing could be further from the truth. Arrogance is the mark of a weak person and an inadequate physician. If you fall into this trap, you will drive away the very people who would otherwise make you successful. Moreover, when the opportunity to cut you down to size arises, they will take it. And they will get away with it because they will stick it to you not by what they do, but by what they fail to do. Whether you realize it or not, your success as a physician depends on your non-physician colleagues who can—and will—make you or break you.

Behave arrogantly with them, and you give them the motive to do you in.

## Arrogance is the mark of a weak person and an inadequate physician.

Since arrogance is often unconscious, you will need to seek regular feedback about whether you are perceived as uppity. People won't tell you if you don't ask. And they won't tell you even then if they are not convinced that you really want to hear the truth, and that you can handle it. Offer respectful answers when your colleagues question you. They do not mean to question your judgment. They just want to understand, and they want to learn. Solicit their perceptions and opinions and then pay attention to them. Incorporate their ideas into your work whenever possible. Give full credit to others, always explicitly insisting that the goal could not have been accomplished without their support. Learn to be an effective follower; don't insist on always being the leader. Keep your mouth shut until you are invited to speak. People don't enjoy hearing you talk nearly as much as you think they do.

## Beware feelings of entitlement

The most deadly consequence of being in a position of some importance is that you may begin to believe that you are really someone special—that you are indeed worthy. With time, you become convinced that you deserve more respect than you are currently getting. Unchecked, this growing sense of your own importance and worthiness knows no bounds. When you see lesser lights being catered to, you start to resent the fact that you aren't treated the same way. Soon, you become convinced that you should have your own parking space, free meals, a staff entourage and other perks befitting a person of your stature. Before long, being treated just the same as everyone else is an insult. After all, you are so much better than the little people.

A sense of entitlement inevitably leads to frustration, anger and resentment. However important you believe you are, there are always those who think they are more important than you are, and there are those who will fail to properly recognize your value to the organization. The result is that you never receive the respect you think you deserve. Instead, you feel jealous and taken for granted. You start scanning the environment for every slight, and uncovering abundant evidence that you are not receiving your due. A sense of entitlement with its resentments is a millstone that will sink you if you do not let it go.

Take the position that it is a privilege to be a physician and that you are grateful for the trust others have placed in you. Expect no special treatment and express your sincere appreciation when others extend special consideration. Respectfully decline excessive favors, and defer to others instead of expecting them to defer to you. When others do something nice for you, have the good grace to be somewhat embarrassed. Send them a written note of appreciation. Such an approach, if sincere, will earn you far more respect from others, and permit a life full of gratitude and pleasant surprise.

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## Choke off pointless rumination

Rumination is the obsessive tendency to dwell on painful thoughts, and to milk them for every bit of aggravation they can produce. It is a tendency in which you will likely indulge to some degree. First, you recall some irritant from earlier in the day. Then you replay the frustrating incident repeatedly in your mind, growing more outraged with every reexamination. Not content to torment yourself only with what happened, you kick yourself about what you did or did not say or do.

You speculate about others' dark motives, work yourself into a frenzy about how wronged you were, bemoan the fact that they will get away with it, and fantasize about getting even. All of this mental energy accomplishes nothing worthwhile. It produces no fresh insights, new options or constructive intentions. If you make rumination a regular part of your life, it will make you utterly miserable.

Recognize it quickly when you find yourself doing this. Many people spend hours consumed by painful rumination without realizing how destructive it is. Once you realize what you are doing, interrupt this masochistic mental activity by focusing on a healthier distraction, or by converting rumination into a constructive problem-solving activity. Consider writing out your position on the issue. This will result in some clarity and relieve some of your pent-up emotion as well. Identify the options that are available, and select the best option. Remember that doing nothing is always an option—often the best one. Focus your attention on another challenging mental task, and concentrate on becoming productive again.

## Set priorities and conduct your life accordingly

During every day that you serve as a physician, there will be more important things to do than you can possibly get done. Everyone around you will have strong opinions about what you should do next. The best way to manage these incessant and conflicting demands is to set thoughtful priorities about how to proceed, and to work your way through each day using these priorities as your guide. If you fail to identify your priorities and inform others about them, your colleagues will insist on setting your priorities for you. There are few things in life less satisfying than trying to please everyone else.

If you fail to conduct your life in accordance with carefully thought-out priorities, you will set yourself up for chronic aggravation. You will waste time and energy on trivial issues and, as a result, you will have to work longer to get the important things done. Distressed persons will bring you their problems, leave them with you and expect you to solve them. All kinds of distractions will vie for your attention. As the leader of the health care team, many of your colleagues will arrange their schedules around yours; make a habit of being late or unpredictable, and they will take the same approach. As a consequence, your daily schedule will always be chaotic. Fail to establish personal priorities and to assert yourself appropriately and you will find yourself reacting to what others consider important. Being held hostage by others' expectations is not a pleasant life.

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List the top ten values in your life. Then, list five behavioral objectives for each of these values. These are the regular activities you plan to pursue to live out your values. Finally, list one or two measurements to document your accomplishments related to your guiding values. This critical document need run no longer than one page. This is the plan for a successful life. Unfortunately, very few of us invest the time and energy to create such a document or to use it as a blueprint for our lives. Not a few aimless lives result from this inattention to detail. See to it that yours is not one of them.

## Recognize the impact you have on others

When you start to work as a physician, you will not be prepared for the impact—or the lack of it—you will have on people around you. You will quickly realize that you have much less impact on your patients' lives than you had hoped. They will continue to lead sedentary lives, eat fatty foods, smoke cigarettes and abuse alcohol in spite of your encouragement to pursue healthier lifestyles.

On the other hand, you may not recognize the significant psychological influence you will exert on your colleagues at work. As the acknowledged team leader, you set the tone. If your mood is positive and upbeat, they will start to feel positive too. If you are crabby and hateful, you will ruin their day. If you panic and look alarmed, you will scare them. If you remain calm and confident, they will conclude that things will probably be just fine. A word of praise or encouragement from you is an exceptional motivator. Any perceived slight or criticism from you cuts like a knife. Lose your temper, and you will create widespread emotional turmoil. If you fail to recognize and take responsibility for the psychological impact your attitudes and behaviors have on others, you will do real harm to the individuals and the organizations where you work.

As a physician, you are always “on stage” at work. Face up to that responsibility and take it seriously. When you turn on the ignition in the morning, put on your game face, and keep it on all day. Assume the demeanor of a pleasant, respectful clinician, and refuse to permit the aggravations of daily life to rattle you. You are permitted to experience all kinds of unpleasant feelings just like everyone else; you are just not permitted to show them. If you conclude that, because you are such an important person, you are entitled to emote openly every time things don't go your way, you can indulge yourself, but the quality of your life—and the lives of those nearby—will suffer. Keep your temper under tight control. When you feel yourself getting angry, concentrate on keeping your mouth shut. Develop and maintain a reputation for emotional equanimity.

## Realize that you need help

Physicians are not trained to be good team players. This is a significant shortcoming of traditional medical training since, in order to be successful, all physicians require support from an effective team. No physician, even those involved in basic research, can function satisfactorily in a vacuum. Having been held individually accountable throughout training and having observed physician “star” role

models caught up in delusions of their individual greatness, you may have mistakenly concluded that you will succeed or fail entirely on your own.

In spite of falling on their faces time and again, many physicians persist in playing the Lone Ranger throughout their careers. They bristle when colleagues question them, arrogantly dismiss others' concerns and keep their own counsel when they should be soliciting others' input. Given daily opportunities to teach and to learn, they are too busy to be bothered. Predictably, they take the same disastrous approach with their patients. Going it alone as a physician makes about as much sense as walking in space without a tether.

Ask for help early and often. Family members and other caregivers will always see things that you will miss. Inquire about their perceptions and solicit their advice. Your patients know themselves better than you do. Go over the options and find out how they wish to proceed. The nurse manager on your floor understands the organizational politics at your hospital better than you ever will. When you stumble across some irritating political barrier, seek his counsel about how you should proceed. Begin to build your team the first day on the job by seeking counsel, listening carefully, incorporating others' suggestions and thanking them for their contributions. A supportive team is essential to your professional success. No one can assign a team to you. You must build it yourself.

## Stop being so selfish

Being selfish is not the problem. Everyone is selfish. It's being unfailingly selfish that will attract unflattering attention, foment resentment and incline your colleagues to write you off as a potential team player. Perceived selfishness becomes a major barrier to your success when you will never admit that you were wrong, when you always find someone else to blame, when no one can recall the last time you took a position on an issue that wasn't in your own best interests or performed some act of kindness that wasn't obviously self-serving. People recognize selfishness readily. They don't like it in themselves; they despise it in others.

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If you are perceived as self-centered, you will create all kinds of problems for yourself. People will characterize you as a joke, and this will detract from your reputation. What reputable colleagues are saying about you behind your back really does matter.

When you finally take a position that has some merit, others will automatically dismiss it without serious consideration. Having observed your self-centeredness in the past, no one will jump at the chance to do you a favor when you need one. And you will need a lot of favors from others during the course of your career.

### **Don't miss the opportunity to enhance your reputation just by keeping your mouth shut.**

There is no need to go to the opposite extreme and turn into a doormat, inviting everyone to take advantage of you. When you feel you must take a position that is in your best interest, admit that openly. Explain why this is important to you. Forget trying to make the case based on how this decision will benefit the organization as a whole. Your colleagues will see right through that nonsense. Make some sacrifices for the team. Extend private kindnesses to others when there is nothing in it for you, including the publicity for being such a fine, upstanding citizen. Remind yourself that there is no need to take a position for or against every issue that arises. Physicians who remain neutral most of the time are rarely viewed as selfish. If you insist on sharing your opinions about every subject that arises, people will tire of your self-importance quickly. Don't miss the opportunity to enhance your reputation just by keeping your mouth shut.

## **Control your temper**

Having a bad temper is not a good thing. Losing control of one's temper is a worse thing. For a physician, having a bad temper and losing control of it is awful, sometimes even disastrous. Physicians, like everyone else, come with varying sensitivities and reaction styles. Hot-tempered physicians face an additional handicap, though. Because of their relative power in most organizations, they can get away with temper tantrums that would end most careers. When flawed physicians fail to exert internal control over their tempers, environmental constraints are the only controls left. Since powerful physicians frequently indulge in tantrums and get away with them, they trigger external consequences only when they have caused a big problem. With atrophied internal control and limited external restraint, things can get out of hand in a hurry.

Ranting physicians invariably insist that their outbursts are justified. In a critical situation, when emotional juices are flowing, everything must go exactly right, or they cannot be held responsible. This is nonsense. Raging physicians make challenging clinical situations significantly worse. Colleagues think less clearly

while being verbally and emotionally abused, flee the environment altogether if at all possible and revert to whatever defensive emotional posture they learned as children if escape is cut off. No one in the world wants to be a patient under the care of an emotionally impaired physician. Make no mistake. Physicians who indulge in temper tantrums in the course of their clinical duties are emotionally impaired. The fact that such outbursts still regularly occur and are tolerated, rationalized and minimized does not change that troubling reality.

### **Make no mistake. Physicians who indulge in temper tantrums in the course of their clinical duties are emotionally impaired.**

Do you have a problem with your temper? If so, face it, seek professional help and get control of this destructive tendency right now. Don't ever say something as inane as, "I just can't control my temper." Of course, you can—if you make up your mind to. Recognizing this destructive tendency in yourself, you must find a way to stop your emotional escalation very early in the process. The instant you sense that surge of rage rising, shut your mouth and walk away. If you can't walk away, just keep your mouth shut. Force yourself to speak calmly and quietly. Say, "Please." Take a deep breath and say, "I can see that I am not communicating effectively. May I try again?"

## **Overcome your fear of rejection**

Everyone wants to be liked. You are no exception. Because of this drive, you will try to please your patients and colleagues. Depending on the kind of work you do, you will be insulated from most complaints. Your patients will generally select you because of the positive comments they have heard from others. Dissatisfied patients will usually slip away quietly. Your office staff colleagues will be inclined to overlook your faults because they need the money. Your colleagues in the hospital have considerable experience in putting up with difficult physicians, and they will typically cut you a lot of slack. But in spite of all this special treatment, not everyone will be happy. Some of them will complain and, when they do, you will feel hurt and betrayed. Even more annoying, most of them will not complain directly to your face. They will complain to someone behind your back. Because of this, when you learn about a complaint, you are likely to become embarrassed and furious, to overreact and, in so doing, to make matters much worse.

If you struggle with substantial feelings of rejection, you are likely to make one of two classic mistakes in your interactions with others: you will be inclined to try too hard to please others, or not hard enough. Doctors who wish desperately to be loved tend to promise their patients and colleagues too much. As a consequence, others take advantage of their good natures. When these physicians pass the breaking point and assert themselves, those who have grown accustomed to milking their human kindness are shocked, dismayed and disappointed. More emotionally brittle physicians fire their patients at the first subtle signs of dissatisfaction, in effect rejecting their patients before their patients can reject them. In both cases, it is the fear of rejection that prompts excessive accommodation or defensiveness.

In your daily interactions with patients and other colleagues, your own level of emotional arousal is probably the best indicator of your need to be loved and respected, and whether your interactions with others are based more on your needs than theirs. If you are frequently hurt, angry, and resentful or chronically distressed in the course of your everyday work, you should probably seek professional counseling. Everyone gets upset from time to time, but chronically unhappy physicians who are thrown into emotional tizzies by everyday aggravations are not normal.

## Conclusion

These are not the only obstacles in the path ahead, but these traps regularly ensnare unwary physicians. A satisfying career in medicine is no accident. Contented physicians make key decisions early in their careers, avoid the miserable snares that less vigilant colleagues meander into, and pursue excellence untiringly throughout their lives. The most fortunate physicians laugh at themselves a lot, are often pleasantly surprised and sometimes choke back tears of joy when they realize they have made a difference. Viewed by cynical colleagues as idealistic or hopelessly naïve, these physicians smile while others frown, reflect while others stew and relish a peace that passes all understanding while their troubled colleagues carp and moan and pass their days whining about how bad things are.

**The most fortunate physicians laugh at themselves a lot, are often pleasantly surprised and sometimes choke back tears of joy when they realize they have made a difference.**

Make the decision now to be a contented physician. Start doing what it takes to make that happen. Make a point to avoid the traps that will keep you from this worthy goal. When you slip, recognize the pit into which you've fallen, dig yourself out of it and refocus on what really matters. Avoid the traps into which so many physicians stumble by realizing they are there, that they are a clear and present danger for every physician and that the quality of your professional life will be better for having avoided them. And stay out of the physicians' lounge.



## About the Author

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Dr. Stewart was born and raised in Rome, Georgia. He graduated from Berry College in Mount Berry, Georgia and received his MD from the Medical College of Georgia. He completed his psychiatric residency at the Medical College of Georgia and then served as Chief of the Mental Health Clinic at the US Air Force Hospital near Rapid City, South Dakota. He opened his private practice in Portsmouth in 1981. He returned to graduate school and earned an MBA from Ohio University in 1999.

Dr. Stewart is a Diplomate of the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology and a Distinguished Lifetime Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association. He is a past president of the Ohio Psychiatric Association.

Dr. Stewart is a former Chairman of The Ohio Partnership for Excellence. He also served as a member of the Board of Examiners for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. Dr. Stewart is the senior author of, "A Portable Mentor for Organizational Leaders," a book published by SOMCPress in 2003. He and his wife, Fay, have two grown sons.