

Student Perspective

Finding Purpose and Garnering Hope in the Era of COVID-19

by Kelsey Lamb and Ashley Creager – Medical student co-facilitators in the MCW COVID-19 virtual support group project

From Kelsey:

Sometime mid-March, we all experienced a life-altering moment, the kind in which we will always remember exactly where we were and what we were doing when we got the news. It looked different for each of us – for some, it was a call to action. For others, it was a request to step back for the sake of the community. No matter where we landed on the spectrum in terms of our work, we were asked to put a pause on “normal.”

Unfortunately, the request wasn't solely from the institution where we spend our days, it also came from our schools, our favorite coffee shops, our community leaders, even our family members. Within a few days' time, it became abundantly clear that no individual would go untouched by COVID-19.

This begged the question: How do we cope?

We were fortunate enough to have a group of leaders at MCW who set out to establish supportive resources for our MCW community, including the creation of peer-led virtual support groups for faculty and staff. These groups, facilitated by the MCW Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Medicine, were founded upon the idea that we are stronger together – when we lean on one another, share our worries, and find common hope. It was an idea, perhaps, that seemed intangible to many in those early days of the pandemic.

When the novel coronavirus reared its ugly head in Wisconsin, I happened to be on my psychiatry rotation. I was at home when I received the official email that our class would not be returning to the hospital for the foreseeable future. The

decision made sense, but as a third-year student, being pulled from the hospital felt nothing short of devastating. There would be no closure with my patients, no further collaboration with my team, no additional exploration of the field that I was considering pursuing as a career. With one “ding” of the inbox, it was over.

I found myself in my bedroom, staring at the ceiling, wondering how I could fill this strange new void. I reached out to my psychiatry clerkship director for sage advice, which is when I learned about MCW’s COVID-19 virtual support group project. It was only a small bud of an idea at the time. I did not hesitate to jump aboard.

Ten weeks later, taking on this role has been fortuitous in so many ways. At a time when I felt a loss of identity and purpose, I unknowingly dove headfirst into student leadership, organizational growth, and the creation of a community. A new purpose seemed to take seed.

What is more, I found reconciliation with my values as a future physician. I had been searching for meaning, trying to decipher my simultaneous love of the hospitalist wards, the bright lights of the OR, the finesse of a psych exam, the sound of a newborn’s first cry and everything else in between. Suddenly, finding myself in the trenches of a pandemic that was – and still is – waging war on mental health, brought me resolve: no matter what I ultimately pursue, mental health will be at the heart of it.

Within these groups, I have seen the burden that those in healthcare often carry and the toll that uncertainty can impose upon mental health. I have seen how tragedy shapes our human experience. Furthermore, I have seen how a community can heal from within.

We found that medical students played an important role as co-facilitators working with Psychiatry faculty members. The support groups offered opportunities for professional development and – perhaps more importantly – a sense of purpose in turbulent times. After all, I felt that I could not possibly be

alone in my roving and restless thoughts. The student response to co-facilitate groups was overwhelming. I, in fact, was not alone.

My good friend and classmate, Ashley Creager, is currently co-facilitating one of our groups. I asked her to reflect alongside me. We shared surprise when we realized how similar our emotions have been throughout this entire process; we soon realized that perhaps that was the whole point.

From Ashley:

From early on, medical school has felt like a great pressure cooker of stress. The days are long, the hours exhaustive, the anxieties pervasive. However, when COVID-19 swooped in entirely uninvited, the pressure was released in a single moment and complete entropy ensued. The entropy, the chaos, and the unknown have imposed a unique burden all its own.

In March, when we were pulled from rotations, I was devastated. I felt sidelined and useless. Early on, I was asked to consider helping co-facilitate a support group for MCW staff. My response was nearly reflexive. It was one of the earliest glimmers of hope for me in a season riddled with heavy doubts and brutal obstacles.

Going into the experience as a student co-facilitator, I was thrilled at the idea of being able to help, if even in a small way. I looked forward to “meeting” new people and having an actual weekly event on my calendar that required interaction, not just passive listening. I was excited about giving support; however, the biggest impact of this experience has been in what I have received.

My group includes a palliative care psychologist and three amazing women who work as administrative associates within the MCW community. Together, we have ridden the waves of grief, anxiety and fear. We have sat with doubts, danced with anger, and searched desperately for hope. We have found joy in the most mundane, celebrated the ordinary and championed each other through our weeks. We have fostered a space of trust and safety and continue to learn what grace for ourselves and others looks like in these unique days.

I have been awestruck and inspired by the tender grit and tenacious love with which humankind is wired, even in the most unforeseeable circumstances.

In the age of COVID-19, I find myself reflecting from innumerable angles while simultaneously dreaming of my future career as an orthopaedic surgeon. Having participated in a co-facilitator role, I have witnessed firsthand how valuable it is to make space for necessary dialogue, for wrestling with reality, for processing the unimaginable and noticing life's subtle joys. Now more than ever, I dream of the infinite ways that I will be able to create space.

Whether for my fellow students or future co-residents and, most importantly, for my patients, I will prioritize and advocate for the development of intentional, safe and restorative soul space. Walking this portion of the journey with this specific group of women has been an immense privilege. It has filled my soul in the most unexpected ways leaving me overflowing with gratitude, humility and, most importantly, hope.

Kelsey Lamb and Ashley Creager are members of the MCW-Milwaukee Class of 2021

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