

AMWA *Linda Brodsky Memorial Journal*

Quotes to Counter

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Jeez, what are you talking about?
Think before you speak, woman!

Persist

That patient was cute – why?
You think I want to sleep with her?

Once more, persist

Don't make mistakes, what if you're
distracted, what if you have a boyfriend?

Clarify, but no aggression

Nurse!
I'm waiting for the doctor.

I am your doctor, how are you today?

You need to speak up
Or else you will be forgotten, quiet girl

...

Slow breath in, exhale with sound,
reverberating, shivering or shaking,
less or more, shift forward,
push together,
thrive.

I wrote a combined poem and essay to convey the challenges I and many other women in the field of medicine face. The format of the poem begins with italicized quotes of phrases that have been said to me throughout my training, followed by a non-italicized line representing my reaction to each incident.

The format of my response slowly shifts from short, terse responses, to a strong long response filling the entire paragraph, and then shifts back into a short one-word line. This was a deliberate method to highlight the initial naïve strength that slowly grows into unfettered frustration and anger, which finally then matures into a stolid confidence from within. I wanted to explicitly show the growing confidence inside to not just react but to act in strength. It begins with a single word, “resist,” representing the need to push through the discomfort. When a condescending or patronizing sentence was said to me I would pretend to laugh it off and ignore it, hoping it would not happen again. I compartmentalized my discomfort away while focusing solely on the patient care. However, later I realized that ignoring the problem was not right, however easy it may be. Promoting a non-sexist environment is in parallel with providing the highest quality of care for our patients. I saw examples including but not limited to healthcare professionals making sexual jokes about their patients or diminishing a patient's pain by explaining that women simply complain more than men. Over time, when

negative comments towards women continued, I realized I also needed to take action to mold this culture into a more welcoming one.

I separated the last stanza to symbolize a shift in perspective – no longer are we beholden to the belief we must simply persist and survive in an environment that reminds us constantly we do not belong. Yes we need to be headstrong and hold tight, but we also need to be active agents of change. The choices we make today to fight discrimination and microaggressions are harbingers of a more inclusive medical culture moving forward.

I started off with “slow breath in, exhale with sound,” because it is critical to take care of our own mental wellbeing while mustering the courage to promote change. The medical training process is as rewarding as it is grueling and thus it takes a heavy toll on our mental health. Before trying to improve the environment for others we need to take a step back and make sure we are starting from a healthy, strong mindset. I meditate, read, make dinner with friends, and reach out to loved ones through phone calls that extend an hour longer than I previously would have let myself take. Be generous to yourself. Sometimes it is acceptable to do whatever it takes to achieve centeredness once again.

And yet, the last stanza also holds words of uncertainty, “reverberating, shivering or shaking.” With pushback comes the possibility of repercussions such as the panic of worse grades or a reputation for being difficult. There is no doubt that changing the status quo will be difficult and uncomfortable. When the OBGYN yelled at me, “Jeez, what are you talking about?”

Think before you speak, woman!” in the patronizing, misogynistic, and belittling way my first reaction was to shut down and be quiet. My neck and back tense, I stood more rigid and spoke less in order to lessen my presence and avoid harm. It was not until later that I processed the event that I realized I was afraid

of him and also afraid of the power he had over me and my medical career if I stood up for myself. In these instances, it is important to turn to the supportive tools against student mistreatment that the institution already has in place. I filed an anonymous report with the help of our institution’s amazing efforts to defend against mistreatment. I stood firm in believing that the solidarity we have in working towards a more equal environment will pay off in the future.

“Less or more, shift forward” means there is no one perfect way to combat discrimination and inequality. Some classmates of mine talked to Deans face to face with their concerns. Others were comfortable confronting the person who instigated the microaggression directly. I know of friends who spread awareness by writing emotional blog posts. Even those who choose to speak only of their trauma with close friends are making an active effort in acknowledging the inequality and advocating for change. Whether or not an action is small or big, it does make a difference.

It was important to include my line “push together” because over the years experiencing microaggressions towards women, I have learned that the strongest impetus for change comes from a concerted group effort. Not only does it give our voice a depth and strength that would not exist if we stood alone, but it also validates each and every one of us that what we believe in is true. I became an AMWA president at our school’s branch and hosted an annual mentor-mentee potluck. We matched female medical students with female attendings who were passionate about sharing and improving the experience of women in the field. As we shared a meal together, we also shared pearls of wisdom and advice on how to navigate the field of our interest as women. For instance, I learned the challenge of being offered less pay than our male equivalent as well as methods to ensure that we negotiate effectively. I also organized multiple intimate

lunches and lectures with prominent female doctors and researchers at the hospital to share what they have learned from their life experiences with incoming students. A strong, actionable lesson we absorbed was to support on another by “sounding off” on what a colleague may have said earlier. For example, during a meeting or a large lecture hall we can refer back to what a peer may have commented previously by saying, “what Sarah said earlier was important because...I wanted to add that...” This allows us as a group to make each of our voices clearer and heard. I am proud to help create a stronger community of like-minded women who are passionate about raising each other up.

Lastly, “thrive” symbolizes that we are in charge of the narrative of our experience in medicine and it is important to strive for an environment where we can unabashedly flourish. There were absolutely a plethora of offices, departments, and teams I have been a part of that were ideal environments to learn and grow confidently. I think fondly on my long hours in the operating room with an entire female team, showing me that women can indeed succeed in previously all-male fields. I have had myriad positive male role-models and mentors who have encouraged me to see beyond boundaries that I never even knew I harbored. They encouraged me to apply for awards, to attend meetings, and to sit at the front of the table. To them I extend my deepest gratitude. These experiences must be held onto as an internal motivator to keep going. It would be effective to cherish them as an important model to emulate once we become a mentor to another. I have learned the most important message throughout both the grueling challenges and the positive moments: we can own our identity as women and still continue to thrive in the field of our choosing.

Bio



Lindsay Pang is an MS4 at Renaissance School of Medicine at Stony Brook University pursuing a differentiation in psychiatry. An honorable mention recipient of the William Carlos Williams competition, she uses poetry and prose to elucidate her own multi-dimensional experiences in medical school and the inextricable, shared challenges women face in the field of medicine.