

Medscape

BLOG

What I Wish I Knew: A Letter to My Younger (MS-1) Self

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Four years ago, I was selected to give the commencement speech at my undergraduate institution. The speech was essentially a letter to my younger self of things I wish I had known and small anecdotes that I learned throughout my 4 years of college. While I won't be giving any speech at medical school graduation, I felt it would be reminiscent to write a letter to my first-year medical student self: The person who had no clue they would rotate through the hospital during a global pandemic; the person who had no idea they would choose to become a surgeon.

To My Younger Self:

Congratulations: You are about to embark on the most intensive, difficult, and rewarding 4 years of your life. Everything you have ever worked, studied, prayed for is about to unfold, but the work, study, and pray does not stop here. In fact, it's really just begun.

This is not meant to scare you, but to prepare you for the sacrifices and challenges that you are soon to encounter. The days will be long, but the years will fly by (well, except the year 2020).

The topics of study will be meticulous and take their fair share of time to understand, but conversations with patients will make it all worth it.

Having just completed 4 arduous but fulfilling years of study in arguably one of the most volatile times to be in healthcare, I can truthfully say that I'd make the same decision all over again if required. Knowing this, I hope you will find solace in the early mornings and late nights you are about to undertake. Everything will all pan out the way it is supposed to. You will pass your exams, succeed in your evaluations. You will find your purpose and the field that best suits you. Enough with the spoiler alerts, though; here are some things I wish I would have known before I started the journey down the path of medical education.

First: Imposter syndrome is real and prevalent, even after passing USMLE board exams, shelf exams, and securing a match letter. The first day of medical school, administration will tell your class, "You are all chosen and meant to be here." It is true. Sometimes, you may forget it; sometimes, you may not believe it. But it is true. I hope you never shy away from opportunities because you think you don't deserve them.

Second: Prioritize the opportunity to learn in the clinical arena over an extra hour in the library. Patients provide us with so many learning opportunities, not only about their clinical disposition but about how to convey compassion and care. As medical students, we have the luxury of time to not only have more conversation with our patients, but to listen to them. Take those opportunities as frequently as you can.

Third: I know that you're stubborn and want to do things on your own, but there are many who want to help. Do not shy away from the guidance, advice, and willing sponsorship of your mentors, faculty members, and those who have done this before (upperclassmen, residents, fellows, etc.). You'll be thankful that you "leaned" on the support of others. Hopefully, you will pay it forward one day.

Fourth: Things that are out of your control will happen. In your life, in the hospital, around the world; this is inevitable. Things will change globally in the next few years and everyone will have to adapt. How you handle uncertainty and change is in your control. While it's uncomfortable, it will make you stronger and improve your adaptability for the future.

Last, and certainly not least, is that this is the greatest profession in the world. You have chosen a field where new life is delivered into the world daily, where cancer is defeated, where vision is restored. You will be integral in some of life's most precious, terrifying, and heart-breaking moments for your patients and their families.

There is great responsibility that comes with your role in these events and medical school will help prepare you for those steps to follow. Whatever you choose to do, you succeed, so long as you work hard, stay humble, listen to your patients, lean on the advice of those wiser, and continue to trust that everything turns out the way it is meant to.

All the best,
Older You

(PS, never pass up the free coffee!)