



HEALTHY WEIGHT IN HEALTHCARE

— with Katrina Ubell, MD —

Katrina Ubell:

Hey there. How are you? Thanks for joining me on the podcast today. Listen you guys. I told you last week that I was going to go see Hamilton and I did. In Chicago. It did not disappoint. Let me say, oh my gosh. So good. If you have the opportunity to see it, definitely, definitely do it. It's so good. You don't need to know all the words.

One thing I was so impressed with was the actors' ability to announce so clearly when they're rapping so quickly. It was really, really amazing. And the sound quality. They have it all dialed in so you can hear everybody and what they're saying so clearly. I always felt that way about Les Miserables, like if I didn't know the storyline, I'm like, "What?" I can't understand. But it's not like that at all. It's so good. It's such a good mix of the historical perspective and then giving it such a modern twist.

You know who played Aaron Burr was Wayne Brady. Remember him? He's the guy who was one of the guys on, Whose Line Is It Anyway? I don't know if he still does but he had his own daytime talk show. He's done a bunch of different things. Anyway, he was Aaron Burr and he was so good. I mean they all were amazing. It really is the best.

For sure I know you know that I was going to come on here and tell you that it was amazing and you had to see it but for real. You're really missing out on something, if you're a fan of musical theater at all, if you don't go. Please do yourself a favor and go. I'm actually thinking for sure my 11 year old has to come and see it. Maybe this summer I'll try to get tickets for him and me and we can take the train down to Chicago and see it. It's so good. Don't miss that opportunity for yourself.

Okay, what we're talking about today is fatigue and exhaustion and how that plays into our overeating. A listener named Megan reached out to me. She wrote the following, "I came up with a question for an upcoming podcast. I think it's very relevant to physician weight loss. I find myself eating to combat fatigue, a trick I learned in residency. It usually does help me stay alert, at least for a bit, but it's getting in the way of my weight loss. From 2 to 4 p.m. I'm dragging and find myself snacking a lot. Do you recommend caffeine or to purposely fast during the quote unquote, 'witching hour?' I know I'm not hungry because I eat a great lunch at noon. In training you sacrifice whatever is needed to succeed. Now it's time to

come up with a better plan."

I hundred percent agree, Megan. For sure it's time to come up with a better plan. That's what I'm going to offer you today on this podcast.

To start off I looked up the definitions of fatigue and exhaustion. Exhaustion is defined as, "To be extremely or completely tired." And fatigue is defined as, "Weariness or exhaustion from labor, exertion, or stress." How about all of the above for most of us? There's the physical exhaustion from labor and exertion. Then there's that mental exhaustion from the stress. I don't think there's one doctor out there who can't identify with this issue. Maybe not now if you're an attending and you have a really nice schedule, but everyone in med school and residency experienced at least some sort of sleep deprivation and developed certain coping strategies to deal.

I remember surgery residents falling asleep standing up against a wall during rounds. I never did that. For me I ate to stay awake and I know it's a real possibility that you did too. I'm going to share with you a story from residency for me because I gained a considerable amount of weight in residency.

As an intern you know how it is. You're on-call every third or fourth night. Sometimes you get thirty minutes of sleep. A lot of time you're running, running the whole time. I would be so tired that it hurt. That's how I always described it. That I was so tired that it hurt and there was no end in sight, many, many hours before I was going to be able to leave. Then the admitting resident would page and I'd have another one or two patients to go see in the ER.

I'd feel so sorry for myself so what I would do is I'd go down to the hospital "coffee shop," in quotes because this coffee shop seriously ... It sounds really nice. You think, "Like Starbucks." It was not a Starbucks. It was this small, junky little coffee shop that had really gross tasting coffee. The only way I could get that coffee to taste good would be to mix it with a packet of hot chocolate mix. Sort of like a little mocha. I was like, "It's kind of palatable if I do that trick."

And it always had popcorn because popcorn is a huge deal in Milwaukee. Apparently Milwaukee eats the second most amount of popcorn in the entire world. So always popcorn. Then a bunch of junk and candy and chips and stuff like that. But what they also had was Dove bars. At two in the morning or whenever this would come up I would go down there, before going to the ER, with my meal tickets and I'd use a meal ticket to go and get myself a Dove bar. I'd get that Dove bar and I'd sit down and really savor it for the five minutes it took me to eat it.

You guys know what a Dove bar is, right? Really, really decadent, yummy vanilla ice cream on a stick with this super high-quality thick chocolate covering. It really did make me feel better in the moment. I got a little dopamine hit from the sugar. It made me feel a little bit full so it gave me a little nice sense of fullness in my stomach. And my thinking about it was that it was a nice thing to do for myself. It

was like treating myself or saying, "There, there. I know it's so hard. Here, you can have a Dove bar to make yourself feel better."

So I did that. But then when you start doing that enough times you know what your brain does? It starts offering to you every night you're on-call, "When are we going to go get a Dove bar? It's 10:30. Is it too early for a Dove bar?" Seriously. I would sometimes get in these habits of eating a Dove bar in the middle of the night every couple of nights. Plus everything else like donuts in the morning and all that other stuff. It's like, no wonder I gained a ton of weight while I was in residency.

The other time that I found myself eating was when I had to do ER shifts. Especially in the evening and the overnight shifts. The daytime ones I was usually pretty okay. But I would go and find the purple popsicles, I don't even like popsicles but the purple ones were pretty okay, and I'd eat one of those. Or I'd eat the saltines. Or the little Nabisco graham crackers in the red wrapper that are really gross. They taste like cardboard. But I'd grab those and have a little snack. Sometimes they had some peanut butter. Little packets too so you could make little peanut butter and graham cracker sandwiches. Or just have some juice.

This was the pattern. This is what you did on those ER shifts. Sometimes I'd snack on these things out of boredom too or it would feel like a treat for myself like, "Poor me. I have to do this eight or 10 hour overnight ER shift. I deserve a popsicle." And like I said I didn't even like them that much but the dopamine hit from the sugar definitely made me happier. Or, I really didn't want to write that behemoth H&P, so I'd avoid it for a little while by eating something.

I did that out in practice too. I would pretty regularly eat a bowl of animal crackers, that were really there for the kids by the way, after I finished seeing patients. I was partly hungry and tired but I also had this idea that I needed to fuel up for this stack of phone calls I needed to make, the reports I needed to go through, and the charts I had to finish. I wasn't going to be able to eat dinner any time soon and I didn't know how to tolerate hunger yet, so I made sure the hunger went away by eating.

Then what would frequently happen is I'd get home late, help put the kids to bed right away, and be so exhausted that I would have liked to fall asleep immediately. Instead of doing that and actually going to bed, I'd stay up. But I wouldn't eat the nice nutritious dinner that my kids had. Instead I'd air pop popcorn and split a bottle of Prosecco with my husband. I figured that was pretty low-fat so I was pretty good to go. Could be worse. That's what I'd tell myself. I'd camp out on the couch feeling like a zombie. Eating popcorn, drinking wine, and watching TV.

Then I'd end up staying up too late and the cycle would continue. It's so funny to me now though because I know that something higher fat would have actually been better for me to eat, but we didn't know the science of weight loss and weight maintenance then that we know now.

Those foods do give us some energy. They make us feel better physically by giving

us that quick energy that we're looking for. They make us feel better mentally because dopamine is a feel-good hormone and we also believe we're doing something nice for ourselves and caring for ourselves when life feels so hard, so that creates positive emotion for us.

I think it's important to tease apart the physical and mental components of fatigue and exhaustion here. The physical exhaustion, like how Megan described herself as, "Dragging and wanting to snack a lot," is the real deal. You physically feel really tired. Like you could fall asleep if you just put your head down on your desk. I pretty much always used to have this kind of fatigue after lunch in the afternoon. I actually had a belief for a while that maybe I was the kind of person who needs a nap every afternoon so I would try to make sure that happened when I was off, since of course I couldn't take an afternoon nap at the office.

But it didn't really always help. Sometimes I'd have that nap hangover and I'd be even grouchier and feel even more sluggish. I'll tell you what solved that problem for me. It was becoming fat-adapted. The way I did that was by not eating flour and sugar on any regular basis anymore. To review, being fat-adapted means that your body is very efficient and familiar with accessing your fat stores for energy when you need it. If you're what's called a, "Sugar burner," your body is resistant to accessing your fat stores for energy and it will make you feel like crap instead basically. You'll get really tired. You might get hungry even though you ate not that long ago. And you might feel really grouchy or impatient or in a funk.

Through the work I've done with my clients and my own personal experience I found that it takes on average about four to six weeks of no flour or sugar to become fat-adapted. How do you know if you're fat-adapted? You can make it four to six hours between meals and feel fine. And if you do feel some hunger it's a tolerable wave that passes pretty quickly. It's definitely not tsunami-level waves pummeling you one after the next.

You know what's so interesting is every now and then when I plan it ahead of time I let myself have some flour, some sugar. That actually happened yesterday. My husband and I were out of town and where we were there's this amazing, amazing Italian restaurant that has authentic Neapolitan wood-oven pizza. They're certified from some Naples certification in Italy that they make it in this authentic way. The crust is amazing and they give you some Italian bread that's super rustic. It's so good.

So we had planned ahead that this was going to be a time when we were going to have this to eat. Have this exception. We went in there yesterday for lunch and I was so looking forward to it. It was amazing. I had bread. I had some bruschetta. I had some pizza. Seriously, it tasted divine. Such a treat. So I ate that for lunch and you know what I noticed was that for the first time in months I totally felt that afternoon fog. That tiredness. Feeling sluggish. It was probably about three or four hours after I ate that. I thought, "That's so interesting because I haven't had that feeling in so long."

It was worth it to me because it was a planned exception. It was really, really good but certainly not something I'm going to do on a regular basis because it doesn't make me feel very good. We got home. You know how it is when you get home from a little trip. You want to get yourself all unpacked. Do the laundry. Grocery shop and things like that. I made myself do that but I was tired. I did not feel like it. Interesting, right?

I see on some of the Facebook groups for doctors how people will talk about eating whatever they want on the weekends or either being on-plan or totally off-plan and believing that this is going to work out for them. Now, many of them are losing weight. They're getting results but what I want to offer is that if you're doing that, you're making your weight loss experience so much less comfortable and slower for yourself. You're also still reinforcing the behavior of going off the rails periodically.

This is the thing, naturally thin people don't regularly go on big carb-laden eating binges. That's how they stay naturally thin. They might have a treat here or there but they aren't going off the rails. So it's really important to look at those eating experiences and learn from them so that you don't keep repeating the same cycle. Because what do we know? What we know is that when you don't learn from setbacks you keep getting the same results you've always gotten and those results will not be permanent weight loss for you.

If you're struggling with fatigue during the day I highly recommend that you commit to eating no flour and no sugar for four to six weeks and see how you feel. Make sure you eat plenty of fat at meal times. My energy levels have never been more even in my life as they are now. It's like I don't even recognize myself you guys. I actually get tired at the right time at night so I go to bed at the right time.

Before I'd be so incredibly tired when the kids went to bed, which was earlier than I wanted to go to bed, seven, 7:30 p.m. Didn't leave me any chance to clean up after dinner, make lunches for the next day, throw a load of laundry in, have my after dinner snack. That was one of my favorite parts of the day and I certainly didn't want to miss that. So I'd push through and get a second wind and then I'd stay up way too late and be dragging myself out of bed again in the morning.

Then there's the physical exhaustion that comes from not being able to sleep like having a call night where you're either paged a bunch of times or you have to go in to take care of someone. If you do shift work like in the ER you have to do some shifts that go against your natural sleep cycles which make you physically exhausted. If you're still a resident or fellow you might still really be in the thick of it with this. Or maybe it's as simple as you have a sick kid or an infant who isn't sleeping well yet or you have pretty bad insomnia or your anxiety keeps you awake periodically.

What you do with this is you put your exhaustion or fatigue on the C-line. The circumstance line of that thought model. Remember the model? Circumstances

which are neutral facts can trigger your thoughts, thoughts cause your feelings, feelings drive your actions, and actions create your results. So the neutral fact when you're so physically tired is fatigue. So you can put fatigue in the circumstance line. This is the perfect place to put it when you aren't going to be able to sleep any time soon.

Believe it or not it's our thoughts about the fatigue that create most of the discomfort and self-pity for us. The fatigue itself is just there. We feel fatigue in our bodies and the message from our bodies is, "Sleep as soon as it's convenient or possible." Then we get to assign meaning to that. So many of us have really uncomfortable thoughts about it like, "Why did I ever pick medicine to go in to? People with normal jobs get to sleep at home every night. Why do some many people have to use the ER as their primary care office? I wouldn't be so busy if they saw their own primary doctor. Why are these patients so needy and entitled? They all need to learn some life lessons about how things really are." Et cetera, et cetera.

These thoughts can make us feel disheartened, disempowered, pitiful, resentful, hopeless. We hate feeling those feelings so what do we do? Go find something to eat to make us feel better. This is how we stop doing that eating. We stay aware and notice how toxic our thinking is about the fatigue and put a name to the emotion that we're feeling. Then we decide if we want to keep thinking that way or if we want to change it. Luckily nothing has to change here in order for you to feel better. You don't even have to sleep. All you have to do is change your thinking.

A thought that I like is, "Being tired is part of the privilege I get for helping people as a doctor." Now this may not feel true or believable at all. If that's the case you'll want to create a new thought for yourself. Another one is, "They can't stop the clock." We used to say that in med school to each other. We knew that no matter how bad or how hard it was, enough time would eventually pass and we'd be able to go home. What I don't totally love about that thought though is how it implies that you're a victim of your circumstances. Like you're being punished by the patients or people you're working with.

Ultimately you always have a choice. You don't have to do anything. If you're in the ER overnight doing a consult, you're there at the very minimum because you don't want to lose your job. You don't have to go in just because they called. You made the decision to go in because doing so is the commitment you've made to your partners, and the hospital, and your family. And the patients for that matter. Keep that kind of thing in mind when you're coming up with your new thoughts. Then when you notice your brain going back to those old thoughts you intentionally remind yourself of your new thought. And think that one on purpose to create a better experience of being fatigued.

Now let's transition and start talking about the mental exhaustion. I know a lot of you are really good about getting the sleep you need when you can at home. I'm always so impressed when my clients tell me how good they are about getting plenty of sleep. That is so good. It basically took me about 40 years to get that

figured out for myself. If you have that down pat, huge high five to you. But even when you're getting enough hours of sleep we can still feel really mentally and emotionally beat down and exhausted throughout the day.

For one thing we have to be on with every patient. We have to be fully focused on them and their problem and how we're going to help them. I know I always wanted to over-deliver so I'd spend extra time helping them with their baby's sleep issues instead of referring them to a book to read or something. I'm an engineer by training so problem-solving is what I do. If the patients came to me with some sort of issue I wanted to help them come up with at least one or two solutions that they could try.

This took a lot of my mental energy. I should back up though and tell you that I'm pretty introverted. I like to call myself an outgoing introvert. I really do love having deep, meaningful one-on-one or small group conversations and interactions with people but doing so does not give me energy the way it does for extroverts. So when I'd say that my patients were, "Sucking the life out of me," it oftentimes felt like that was really happening in the sense that they got everything that I had in terms of my daily energy allotment. So there wasn't anything left for me or my family at the end of the day.

I really wish I'd gotten more coaching during that time and understood myself and my introversion better because I think I could have dealt with it in so much more of a constructive way than eating popcorn, drinking Prosecco, and watching the Kardashians. But it's all working out perfectly because now I get to help you figure this out for yourself.

For me, offering a lower-quality patient interaction wasn't something I was willing to do. I thought I did a good job and I wasn't willing to offer less. Here's where I could have really changed things. I could have looked at these days through an entirely different lens. One of compassion for myself and my patients. I could have accepted that my job was very emotionally draining for me and that didn't have to mean that anything was wrong. I could have made sure I wasn't planning anything extra on work nights. I could have realized that while staying up late, eating the snacks, and watching TV seemed like a nice thing to do for myself after a long and hard day, it was actually making things worse.

I could have taken a rational approach to this and tested out different self-care activities to see how they made me feel. Things that offer active stress-reduction like taking a nice shower or bath, resting in bed while reading an interesting book, meditating or taking a walk, but I was totally honed-in on the TV, social media, snack eating plan. I didn't spend any time wondering if modifying that might actually make my experience of my job and my life better.

Then just like we did with the thoughts about physical exhaustion above, we can have the same thoughts about mental exhaustion that don't serve us. We think in a way that makes us the martyr or the victim and that makes us feel terrible. Not

only about our jobs but about our home lives as well. Again, the ticket here is awareness of what you're thinking. More likely than not you're just believing the thoughts your brain is offering you at these times without evaluating them at all.

You want to take on that watcher or observer role and see what thinking patterns you have and decide whether they serve you or not. Doing a thought download during these times is a great idea too. It's an excellent way to see what's floating around in your head. I actually just got a thought download from a client not long ago, after she'd had a long streak of being on-call and working. After I read it I messaged her and told her to read it all again in the morning after she'd slept. She wrote back the next morning to say that she could totally see how none of it was as big of a deal as she had thought it was that night and that she wouldn't have any problem moving on with the charts she needed to finish and the things at home that she needed to catch up on.

You can do that too. Write it out to empty your brain of those imaginary pinball thoughts that are bouncing all around in your brain and evaluate them later after you've slept. Once you know that what you're thinking while you're so tired is generally neither helpful nor true, your experience of being fatigued and exhausted can be so much better.

I'd be remiss if I didn't also mention sleep hygiene here. I definitely wouldn't recommend drinking caffeine in the afternoon because it might really mess up your ability to sleep that night. The other thing a lot of people do is they have a glass of wine at night to help them relax so they can fall asleep better, but any sleep specialist will tell you that while you may fall asleep faster if you do this the quality of your sleep is poorer. You really want to set yourself up for having the deepest, most restful and rejuvenating sleep you can have while you're actually asleep.

I know that now that I've changed my eating habits and lost the weight, I feel more rested after getting fewer hours of sleep. Meaning I don't need as much sleep as I used to and I still feel more rested and have better energy.

We can talk about sleep hygiene on another podcast episode if that's something that you guys are interested in. Let me know for sure.

I want to say a big thanks to Megan for your question. I know this is an issue so many other people struggle with too so I'm so glad you suggested it as a podcast topic.

I know that a bunch of you have found me through Facebook and other social media. I also know that word of mouth is so powerful when it comes to sharing a message. What I wanted to ask is for you to mention this podcast to any friends you have that you think might benefit from it. We do not want to leave any of our physician colleagues behind on this journey to permanent weight loss but also to improving the experience of being a doctor.

I also wanted to ask you to leave me a rating and review of this podcast on iTunes if you haven't already. There are well over a thousand of you who've subscribed to this podcast which is fantastic, and I only have 22 reviews. I know you're out there because I'm getting emails from you. You can leave a review either on your podcast app or the computer. Strangely, leaving a review is more tricky than it seems like it should be for an Apple product so if you don't know how to leave a review or want a little tutorial, go to the show notes page for this podcast, which you'll find at katrinaubellmd.com/16. Scroll down a little bit. You'll see an area that says, "Share the love." Underneath that there'll be an area you can click that says, "Here's how." That will take you to a step-by-step tutorial of how to leave a review from either your phone app or a computer.

Thank you so much for doing that. Ratings and reviews help other people to find this podcast through iTunes. As always if you have any comments or questions head to the show notes page at katrinaubellmd.com/16 and let me know. I'd love to answer your question on a future podcast.

With that I'm going to say goodbye. Have a fabulous week. I will talk to you soon. Take care.