



WEIGHT LOSS FOR BUSY PHYSICIANS

— with Katrina Ubell, MD —

Katrina Ubell: Hey, friend. How's it going? Welcome back to the podcast. Super excited to have you here and to talk about a really good subject that most of us don't talk about. We're gonna talk about what it's like to be sued.

This is one of those things that I'm not sure anybody is really super excited about ever. I think if we have our druthers, right? If we have our options, we have our choices, we are going to always choose to not go through that if we can. But as a physician for many people, this is really just something that we go through. And the thing that's so difficult about it is that we don't tend to know of other people who've been sued because, first of all, we don't like to talk about it, but secondly because we're not legally allowed to talk about it a lot of the time. So that happens pretty often where we are counseled to only discuss the lawsuit or any details or particulars about it with our lawyer. Some people are even counseled to just not discuss it with anybody except the lawyer. Like literally do not even talk about it at all with anybody.

And I think that there are people who can compartmentalize that and just move on with their day in their life and they do okay. But I think it's hard for it to not do a number on you emotionally. Especially because for so many lawsuits, it gets dragged out for years and years. And I've heard of people talking like well, they think that if it goes to trial it might be at this time. Well, we've already got a vacation scheduled so should we maybe adjust the vacation or things like that. And then that time comes and of course, it doesn't go to trial during that time or it gets pushed back because of this thing or that thing. There's just so much unpredictability in the process and that can be really challenging. But we often really feel alone. Even though we know that other people have been sued before, other physicians get sued all the time, in fact, we still feel really, really alone.

So I was recently coaching one of my clients who was going through a lawsuit situation. And she, of course, didn't have to give any details. So it was okay to discuss it. But she had just had her big deposition. So that had happened the day before. And so she was asking for coaching because she had gone through that whole day of deposition and came home and went off of her eating plan. And afterwards, she was filled, she said, with so many negative emotions. She was feeling so much shame, and guilt, and felt so bad about herself that of course she then ate. But then she felt bad about herself because she ate, right? It's like this shame stacking that we do. And we think that we deserve it.

We're like, "I'm an awful person. And I'm a terrible doctor. And I'm just not worthy of anything." So then I eat. And then we use the eating as further evidence for our negative shameful thoughts about ourselves.

So just to make it clear what the difference is between shame and guilt. Guilt is when you believe that you did something wrong and shame is when you believe you are wrong. You are bad. It's kind of your make up or the fiber of your being. Or just who you are at your core is bad, or not enough, or unworthy. And that's where shame comes from. So what shame loves to do is to hide. So we are already in a situation in the lawsuit where we can't share with people or talk a lot about what's going on. And then we feel like something's really wrong with us because we're the doctor that got sued. And then we can't talk about it. Plus, we're feeling shame, which wants to hide, which means we really don't talk about it. So you can see how you can get into this negative loop. This kind of shame spiral. And for many people, this goes on for years. And people will gain a ton of weight during this time because they're eating to feel better because they can't really talk about it with anybody, or they can't really process it, or they just want it to be over with.

I think sometimes we think that that thought, I just want this to be over with, is just us telling the facts, right? We're just saying that's just what I want. But the only reason we want it to be over with is because we aren't willing to feel the negative emotion. It feels so bad, we want it to be over with so we can stop feeling this way. Because we think that it's the lawsuit that's creating the negative emotion. But the lawsuit, you guys, listen, stay with me here on this. The lawsuit is a neutral fact. What? Yes. It is. Okay? It is somebody who's filed some legal paperwork at a court. And then a copy of that paperwork found its way into your possession. That's literally all it is, right? It's totally neutral.

But we then apply meaning to it with our thoughts. And thoughts we have. Right? Lots and lots and lots of thoughts about maybe the patient. Maybe we kind of blame the patient for suing us. Maybe we blame other people for their involvement in whatever went down, whatever happened. Maybe we start feeling really defensive thinking that we did the best that we could and this is just a natural outcome. Maybe it's somebody that you operated on and they had a known side-effect that they were consented for. And yet, they're still suing you. You might be thinking that it's completely ... You're totally undeserving of being sued because you already consented them to the possibility that they might have this undesirable outcome or side-effect. And we think so negatively. And then remember, we can't really talk to people about it. So we just let this fester and stew inside of us. And it eats us alive, right?

For so many people, I feel so bad. In fact, I've heard of insurance companies settling because the physician who was being sued was in such a bad mental state over the lawsuit that they really just needed it to be done. And the insurance company went along with that. But of course, the insurance company doesn't want to give a payout if it's not warranted. So there's a whole process to go through with all of that. And of course, preparation for being interrogated by the opposing side and all of those other things.

So what we tend to do then is we have all these negative emotions and then we start blaming ourselves or we start thinking really terribly and negatively about ourselves. And then this is the lens through which we are approaching our other patient interactions that we have.

So we're already feeling like that punch in the gut. Like, "I'm this terrible doctor. And I'm the person who got sued. And I hoped this would never happen to me. And then now I have to go into this room and pretend like nothing happened? Like everything is fine?" A lot of physicians end up just overthinking things, double checking, asking for a little curbside consult way more. They feel like their confidence is completely shot and they're just second guessing everything. Maybe even third guessing or fourth guessing. I've definitely worked with people who have a lack of confidence in their decision making skills and so easy to fall back into this when you feel like you've just endured such a blow. Especially if you thought that what you did was okay and it just didn't turn out maybe the way that we would've wanted it to.

So we go through this process then of having to continue on. And I think there's a period of incorporation. There's that initial shock, and learning, and meeting with the lawyers, and getting all set up, and all of that. And then if you have to wait a while, which many people do, like many months oftentimes, then there's a good of an incorporation of it is like yeah, you're in the middle of a lawsuit, but it's not something you're having to deal with on a daily basis. And so sure, your brain in the middle of till random times will be like, "Yeah, don't forget you're being sued." Just to make you feel bad about yourself, right, in that moment. But it's not something that is just completely on the forefront of your thinking all the time.

But then as you approach any important meetings, or important depositions, or any of those kinds of things, it's really normal for there to be a lot of nervousness, feeling like there's so much pressure on you to be able to articulate what happened. This might've happened years and years ago so now you're kinda like, "I'm not even sure exactly how to tell the story of what happened or what my recollection was of it." Being coached by your legal team to answer questions in a certain way, which might seem kinda difficult or just challenging for you. And so it's very, very normal to go into that deposition or that meeting with a lot of fear and a lot of negative emotion.

But here's the thing, just because it's normal doesn't mean that that's the way it has to be for you. Just because most people feel that way when they go into it, doesn't mean that you have to feel that way either. Now, not to say that you're gonna come just flouncing in there like everything is completely fine and you don't have a care in the world. That may not be at all how you approach it. But you can direct your brain on staying focused on the task at hand, right? Because what is the task at hand? Answering the questions as clearly as you possibly can while not providing extra information. I mean, this is what I'm told. I should preface this by saying that, knock on wood, I was not sued while I was in practice. So I have not personally had this experience, but I know plenty of people who have and I've worked with people who have. So this is what I've gathered from speaking with them. And so you are being counseled to not give extraneous information, not offer a whole bunch of extra information that's not asked for. You just should answer the question and that is it.

So when you can stay focused on that and stay really present with what is the lawyer asking, and what is my answer, and taking a pause, taking a break, asking for it to be repeated, whatever it is that you need to be able to answer it. That is what you focus on. Because what your brain wants to do, especially your limbic brain, right? Your more primitive brain is like, "The sky is falling for sure, everything's horrible, you're gonna lose everything, you're gonna be alone, and living in the street."

Right? Like that's basically where your brain is going. It's like, "This is really bad. Did you know this is really bad. Don't forget this is really, really bad." It will just want to basically give you those obtrusive thoughts, right? Just kind of, "Hey, and don't forget. Don't F this up." Constantly having those thoughts in there.

So when you think though that having those thoughts is a problem or is bad, then you just get yourself even more riled up. You're resisting your experience. You're thinking it shouldn't be like this. I bet other people ... Right? Constant comparison to people even though we aren't even able to talk to them about what their experience is. But other people are much more calm about this and I'm just freaking out and having a really hard time. It doesn't have to be that experience of it for you. It really can just be that I'm just going to let this experience unfold and be open to what comes.

So I want to give you just a little bit of a different example. A couple years ago, my mother gave me a call and she was telling me about how she had gone to see the doctor for something totally unrelated. And he was like, "Yeah, okay. Hey, before we do that, we need to just check this." And everything seemed fine. And he discovered that she had bladder cancer. And I thought, "Come again? What? You're fine. What are you talking about you have bladder cancer?" And she's like, "Yeah, that's what he found. And I need to get this done. And this and that." And I think she had been so blindsided thinking this was just a routine thing. And then found out she had cancer. She hadn't even really had a chance to ask any questions or anything. And so of course, when I was asking her questions, she didn't have answer to them. And so we hung up the phone.

And I remember just sitting there and thinking, "Okay, the neutral fact is my mother has something in her bladder that is likely cancer. Doctor said it's probably cancer. I get to decide how I want to think about this." And I remember almost being like, "Whoa, where is this coming from? What? Why am I so level-headed about this all of a sudden?" But this is that coaching work at play here. I was like, "Okay, I get to decide." And so I thought for a minute. I thought, "Well, I don't even actually have any information yet. As far as I know, she doesn't have cancer. They just think she has cancer. And even then, we don't know what that's gonna mean.

So how about I just decide that what I know for sure is that my mom was okay today and she's going to do what's required to sort this all out and we'll take it a day at a time as it comes with the information that we get." And that felt really true and believable. It felt like, "Yeah, okay, I don't need to freak out. I don't need to get upset. I don't need to start letting my brain go out of control that everything is gonna be horrible, and she's such a healthy person, and how could this happen, and in my brain have her dead and buried already when she's very much alive and fine right now." And that really served me because it ended up that it was a pretty minor thing that she got taken care of and she's completely fine now.

So I offer to you that example because you get served legal papers that you're being sued and you really can take that moment and think to yourself, "Okay, how do I want to respond to this? What is the meaning that I'm going to apply to this? I am going to approach this in a certain way that's gonna be deliberate and serves me. I just have to figure out what that way is," right?

So much more level-headed than completely panic, and freaking out, and blaming ourselves, and feeling sorry for ourselves, and blaming the patient, and all those other emotions which are so exhausting. Kinda like what we talked about last week with feeling so much depletion. With energy and even physically. So much depletion.

People who are going through a lawsuit will often have really terrible dreams, and they won't be able to sleep, and they have so much anxiety, and insomnia, and all of that is created by the meaning that they're applying to it. The thinking that they have about this lawsuit and about themselves. Because here's the thing, when you really worry that you might truly lose everything and then you're living under a bridge somewhere, I mean, yeah, of course you're gonna be thinking this is a terrible, terrible thing. But when you know that no matter what happens, I've got me and I ... This is what I always believe about myself. I just know that if everything went away, I have a really good work ethic, and I'm a hard worker, and I will get a job, and I will make money. It doesn't matter if it's as a grocery store checker, or working at Starbucks, or something else. I know that I will never go without and I will be able to provide for my family. Maybe in a different level than I have right now, but I know that that is a core part of who I am.

So you might be able to tap into something like that as well for yourself where you're just like, "You know what? I'm a smart person. And I know I can provide value no matter what." So even if this all falls apart, this whole doctoring thing just becomes something I can't do anymore, I know I have a lot of value to offer the world. And the way that you make money is by exchanging value for money. That's how it works. So I'm just offering you that as a way of thinking or there might be a different way that it works better for you. But thinking about it in a way that allows you to stay more in a rational place and not let your brain get so carried away with everything that's a horribleness that might come.

So then you go through your deposition, or your lawsuit, or going to court, or trial, or whatever. And it's a difficult day, right? There's a lot going on. Maybe you're being blamed, maybe the lawyers are saying things that are just totally not true about you. They're basically lying about you. They're saying maybe some of the stuff is even being put into print or online. Maybe it's in the newspaper or possibly even on television or something like that. People are saying all kinds of different things. Or even just what you're imagining what people are thinking, right? That's generally our judgments about ourselves that we're projecting onto other people. But then after that, it makes complete sense to treat yourself very gently and kindly.

And that's what was happening with my client is she was kind of beating herself up a little bit. She was just like, "Well, that was horrible." Oh and then you ate some food and see, here's even more evidence that you're even more horrible. Rather than this is what I offered to her is just going like, "Wow, that was a really tough day. Okay, so you ate a little bit. Alright. It's not a big deal. I've got you. It's gonna be fine." Right? Really supporting yourself and loving yourself through the process rather than shaming yourself through the process, hiding, and feeling really awful about the whole experience.

So I want you to just think about that as an option. I'm sure there are some of you who are listening who are in the process of going through a lawsuit or have been through one. And it's important that you recognize that you're in charge of what that whole experience is like for you. This is not something that is just happening outside of you and you have no control over. You get to decide what kind of experience this is gonna be. And I might add that you could decide that it would be really interesting. You're gonna learn something, you're gonna see what this process is all about, you're going to take the advice by experts that have been hired for you, and you're gonna let them handle all the things that might be of concern. And know that you don't need to handle it. That's why they're hired. You get to move on and keep doing your life, living your life until they need something from you. And then you're more than happy to be a part of that. And just letting it unfold and seeing what happens versus immediately thinking this is the worst thing in the world and then looking for evidence in all of your interactions and all the different things you have to do for years about how this is the worst thing that could ever really happen to you professionally.

So with that have a wonderful week. For your sake, I hope you're not having to manage your mind around thoughts from being sued. But if you are, just know that I love you. I'm with you. You can get through this. You will get through this. It's all gonna be okay. Have a wonderful week. Take care. Bye.