

Listening to Our Bodies, Even When It's Hard

By Katie Rose Guest Pryal

It's hard to believe that in a time of a pandemic that I would be giving advice about paying attention to one's health. One would think we're already doing that. But from what I've seen and experienced, the opposite is true.

It is easy to ignore what our bodies are telling us—about sleep, stress, pain and more—to our detriment. At best, we are running ourselves into the ground.

At worst, you end up as an inpatient having surgery over the New Year holiday. Believe me, prepping for the new semester is hard enough without an IV getting in the way. I could have avoided my illness if I listened to what my body told me early on. But I didn't.

Making Excuses

Mid-December, I got sick with an ordinary illness that can be treated with antibiotics. I took the antibiotics, and it went away. Or so I told myself.

The symptoms of the illness came back slowly, I tried to explain them away. When I was feeling run down, it was because I wasn't sleeping well. If I was feeling listless and lacking interest in doing things that I ordinarily love to do, then that was because I was feeling depressed and anxious around the holidays like I always do.

With chills, aches and too many real symptoms to explain away, I headed back to the hospital. After a day of IV antibiotics, they sent me home with two more weeks of oral antibiotics. I felt great for about three days. I exercised. I worked for hours and hours, making up for what I'd missed when I'd been exhausted. And I ignored my worsening symptoms, not wanting to believe that I wasn't better.

Finally, on December 23, I was admitted to the hospital with a dangerous internal infection that started from an ordinary illness. Four days of antibiotics became over a week in the hospital with IV antibiotics twice a day and surgery.

In short, something small and manageable became big and unmanageable. And perhaps, if I'd listened when my body had told me that something was wrong, the small thing would have remained small. But I didn't listen. Because I didn't believe that I had time to listen.

Right now, most of us are overworked and sleep-deprived. Nothing about our lives is easy right now.

What all of this means is that, in the famous words of Blain from the movie *Predator*, "I ain't got time to bleed." We don't have time to be sick or to have our bodies break down on us. We really don't have the extra time. But we are humans with human bodies. We must accept our own physical limits, flaws and weaknesses. We must rest when we're tired, and recognize when we're sick, and then do something about it.

It is amazing how incredibly hard it can be to do those things.

Respect Your Own Limits

In the hospital, just after my procedure, I felt all right. They'd given me some local anesthesia and pain medicine. Those drugs suppressed the pain at my surgical site. Those are facts that I knew. I knew, rationally, that once those drugs wore off, I would feel whatever pain the surgery had caused.

However, shortly after I got back to my room, my husband came to visit. Once he arrived, I insisted that we take our regular morning walk down to the Starbucks in the hospital lobby. Every day I was in the hospital we made this walk to get our morning drinks. The ritual was soothing.

"I don't think this is a good idea," he said, referring to taking a long walk after my procedure. "You need to rest this morning."

"I feel fine," I said brightly. And I did, for the most part. He expressed some more concern, I ignored it, and then off we went to Starbucks, me holding his arm

like I'd done every morning, because I was not well. As we stepped into the Starbucks, I felt the first stab of pain, sudden and sharp.

"Ouch," I told him. "I felt my surgical spot."

After we got our drinks and made our way back to my room, the pain grew worse.

More frequent stabbing, then radiating. Then the nausea came. When we finally got to my room, I collapsed on the bed and started to sob.

All of this suffering had been predictable. I'd had minor surgery at 8 a.m. I should not have taken a walk at 10 a.m. I'd made a terrible decision. I should have respected my limits.

We have to not only be aware of, but also respect, our limits. And if we're not making good decisions, we have to listen to the smart people who give us good advice about what our limits should be. I should have listened to my husband (a very smart man), but I didn't. And a very predictable outcome ensued. I overextended myself and ended up in severe pain that required emergency medical intervention.

I felt so stupid. (I hate feeling stupid.)

Situations where we push our limits arise often in our daily lives, resulting in crises that could have been avoided. If we pay attention to our limits, we can head off the crises. Some crises, of course, are unavoidable. But others are caused by our own decisions to push ourselves too far. We overextend, and then we crash.

Time to Do Less

We live in difficult times. Although there is hope on the horizon with the Covid vaccines, for the past few

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Women on the Move,
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executive VP for research, innovation and knowledge enterprise at Ohio State University.

- **Roslyn White** moves from senior associate director of recruitment at Murray State University KY to assistant VP for enrollment management at Alcorn State University MS.

- **Tiffany Willoughby-Herard** becomes equity advisor for the ADVANCE Program for Equity and Diversity and advisor to the dean of the School of Humanities on equity, diversity and inclusive excellence at the University of California, Irvine.

- **Denise Wujciak** becomes director of sports medicine/senior woman administrator at Kean University NJ. 

PROFILE: Educator Seeks to Increase Pool of Minority K-12 Teachers,
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with the National Education Association Foundation, she traveled to Brazil. But her visit to Egypt was, in her words, a “game changer.” She spent two weeks in “awe” of the country and its connections to the past.

When she travels, DelColle likes to wander off the beaten path to meet and talk with the local people. While in Jordan, she “enjoyed [meeting] the local Bedouins who invited us to dinner and introduced us to their families.”

On DelColle’s bucket list are a trip to India and a return to Europe, specifically France and Italy. When the pandemic finally allows travel to return to normal, she would also like to visit some of the Greek islands.

“I’m a warm weather person,” she admitted. “I’m not doing one of those Alaska cruises.”

DelColle finally bought a house four years ago. After she finished her PhD, she enrolled in a carpentry class and asked for and received power tools for Christmas.

“I try to keep stretching myself to learn new things,” she said. “You have to do the thing that scares you to get to the new place.” 

PROFILE: Darling-Hammond Bridges Academia and Activism at the NBJC,
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is invested in helping people figure out how to navigate academia and do the work they care about, such as queer of color analysis and critique.

She maintains strong relationships with scholars at colleges, universities and think tanks. Since beginning her NBJC position in October 2020, she has begun conversations about ways to collaborate and advance the work. Darling-Hammond anticipates that NBJC will be publishing research and presenting at conferences.

“We are looking at experiences of schooling, and we work concretely with young people and with caring and

concerned adults who support them to imagine what we could do to reshape the environment they’re in, so it enables thriving.” she says.

They will also look at large, quantitative data sets and expect to intervene in the kind of data that is collected so that it’s easier to measure NBJC’s populations of interest and gauge whether they’re getting the resources they need.

NBJC is developing a scholar-in-residence program.

“We’ll have panels, talks and conference presentations and continue to build the community and invite people into the work,” she says. “There’s a culture shift needed that is happening, but it’s slow. It’s likely going to manifest both in relationship to what resources are invested, so that it becomes important to people who wouldn’t otherwise think about it.” 

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months, rates of infection have never been higher. More people are getting sick, and more people are dying. During this same time period, U.S. politics has been in a constant state of upheaval. So, as a matter of fact, has higher education itself.

Given these difficult circumstances, we simply can’t do as much as we used to. We must take on fewer responsibilities. I realize this advice sounds obvious, but I know far too many of us who continue to work as though our world is the same as it was before the pandemic and the myriad political crises. For these colleagues, their workloads remain the same—or worse, their workloads are heavier now. Either one of those is a recipe for disaster. Now is the time to do less, not more.

We need to make time to go to bed an hour earlier or sleep an hour later if we can. We need to be sure that we sit down to eat, and don’t skip meals. We need to make sure we move or exercise if we can fit it in our lives. We must take care of our bodies, or our minds can’t do their work. But we can’t take care of our bodies if we overextend ourselves. We will end up hurting ourselves instead.

So, listen to your body, respect it and protect it or you’ll end up paying the price in ways you can’t imagine. 



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