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What I Learned From Superheroes

A humorous view of the media's influence on a future emergency physician.

Like many children growing up in the decades before the advent of VHS and DVD players, cable television, electronic games, computers, cell phones, and iPads, I spent many hours reading about the adventures of superheroes in comic books.

Over the years, my younger brother and I managed to accumulate a large library of such case report journals documenting the extraordinary lifesaving accomplishments of this elite group of dedicated practitioners. These invaluable descriptions of multiple-casualty disasters, weapons of mass destruction, preparedness, and lifesaving techniques survived intact until I left home for college when, for some inexplicable reason, my mother threw them all out. Afterwards, I would sometimes ask her if she knew the monetary value of the collection she had discarded—until one day, after a few moments of silence, my mother quietly asked me if I knew the value of the medical school education that she and my dad were paying for.

I never mentioned the collection again, and over the ensuing years I thought less and less about superheroes—except for the occasional reminders provided by the increasingly spectacular movie versions of their adventures and the echoes of superhuman efforts I witnessed in hospitals. But I never forgot the lessons I had learned from this unusual

group of overachievers. In fact, it is just possible that the way superheroes handle themselves and go about accomplishing their objectives in emergencies helped shape my choice of medical specialty.

What did I learn from superheroes? I learned that their mission in life is often driven by early-childhood experiences with illnesses or deaths of loved ones (Superman's parents died

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in a catastrophic explosion, Batman's parents were murdered) and trauma, lots of trauma. Another lesson I learned is that superheroes typically sacrifice the good life, or at least an easier life, for the privilege of helping others. In practical terms, superheroes are on call always and on the scene whenever necessary. They are no strangers to “single coverage” (Superman, Batman) but also work very effectively in teams (Legion of Superheroes, Fantastic Four). Superheroes often suffer setbacks and frustrations but eventually prevail.

I learned early in life that superpowers are not gender-specific. When Superman's cousin Supergirl arrived on earth in the spring of 1959, one future emergency physician enthusias-



tically endorsed the event in a letter to the editor—my first letter to the editor published in a national peer-reviewed publication.¹ I'm proud to say that I wrote that letter long before “political correctness” was invented. I also learned that a superhero sometimes manages to fix a bad situation, only to witness its unexpected consequences afterwards. Here, I am reminded of the patients we sometimes treat in the ED, only to read about their later misdeeds on the front pages of tabloid newspapers.

I learned several other important lessons from superheroes as well, but one of the most important is that even superheroes spend most of their lives doing ordinary things as Clark Kent (Superman) Bruce Wayne (Batman), etc—just as all emergency physicians can recall the spectacular saves while continuing to provide the daily wound care and acute medical treatments needed by so many people.

And now, after returning from a brief vacation at Superman's Fortress of Solitude and unpacking the Batmobile, it's back to work! **EM**

Reference

1. Flomenbaum N. Supergirl [letter]. *Action Comics*. 1959;1:255(8):22.

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