

Med checks: 15 minutes can make a difference

“How to avoid burning out and keep your spark” by Drs. Phil Bohnert and Anne O’Connell (CURRENT PSYCHIATRY, January 2006, p. 31-42) offers welcome insights in this time of high stress for clinical psychiatrists. The authors’ analysis and suggestions seem worthwhile.

When discussing “External causes for burnout,” however, the authors took a cheap, unnecessarily harsh shot at the “15-minute” medication check as “probably the most demoralizing hazard.” That would only be true if the psychiatrist does not see the value of such brief interactions or cannot do them properly.

We can indeed help patients within 15 minutes and make empathetic connections by asking about their lives and what they value. Ignoring this skill slights the many psychiatrists who—because they want to serve the underserved but lack adequate funding—do quite well within that time frame.

Further, some patients, depending on their pathology and personality, prefer shorter visits. A truncated visit may help these patients stay in treatment.

Finally, the 15-minute visit is not all managed care’s doing: Brief med checks were common in community psychiatry long before the ascendance of managed care.

As the old saying goes for child rearing, it’s not (only) the quantity of time, it’s the quality of time together.

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The authors respond

We thank Dr. Moffic for his thoughtful comments. We do not wish to negate the value of the 15-minute medication check or its utility in increasing public access to psychiatric care.



It must be noted that psychiatrists have reported anecdotally and in the literature^{1,2} that such a brief visit can frustrate the desire to handle both medications and psychotherapy. For those who envisioned a psychotherapy-based practice, it may well remain a burnout hazard.

We welcome further discussion of the pros and cons of the 15-minute med check.

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References

1. Regestein Q. Psychiatrists’ views of managed care and the future of psychiatry. *Gen Hosp Psychiatry* 2000;22:97-106.
2. Kalman TP, Goldstein MA. Satisfaction of Manhattan psychiatrists with private practice: assessing the impact of managed care. *Medscape Psychiatry & Mental Health eJournal* 1998;3(1).

Music memories quell addictions

A friend and colleague recently gave me the book *Live at the Fillmore East: A Photographic Memoir* (Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1999), in which photographer Amalie R. Rothschild chronicles the celebrated rock music venue on New York’s Lower East Side.

The book has been a powerful therapeutic tool for three of my patients:

1) Mr. S, age 56, has a long history of alcoholism and depression and had been fighting with his wife over his impulsive purchase of a guitar that belonged to Pete Townshend of The Who. For Mr. S, the guitar brings back memories of the Fillmore, where he met Townshend backstage. He considers that period the high point of his life, which has since been a series of personal and professional disappointments.

When I showed Mr. S the book, he wept inconsolably for his lost youth. I encouraged him to tell his wife about what he experienced. The

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couple talked honestly for the first time in 20 years, and he made a commitment to her to stop drinking. He remains sober.

2) Mr. Z, a 22-year-old paralegal, battled marijuana dependence and an anxiety disorder. His parents divorced when he was age 4. His mother and stepfather have been pushing him to go to law school, while his father, a former music producer who is bedridden with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, feels he should do whatever makes him happy. Mr. Z grew up listening to 1960's music with his father.

Mr. Z noticed the Fillmore East book during a recent session. He convulsed with tears as he looked through it and spoke lovingly of his father for the first time. He has since stopped smoking marijuana and has reconnected with his dying father. He is now going to law school and wants to specialize in entertainment law.

3) Mr. M, age 33, has been treated for alcoholism and attention deficit disorder. Unable to stop drinking as an outpatient, he checked into the Crossroads Rehabilitation Centre in Antigua, West Indies, for 1 month. When he returned he "felt like an adult for the first time." He regularly attends Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and feels "spirituality" replacing the anger he once felt toward himself and the world.

Upon seeing the Fillmore East book, Mr. M cried over the photos of Eric Clapton. He is inspired by Clapton's recovery from addiction and how Clapton, after his preschool son's death, founded Crossroads, which provides free substance abuse treatment for Antiguans.

Like Clapton, Mr. M wants to help other alcoholics recover. He is applying to school to become a substance abuse counselor.

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