

In the drafty call room, a miracle unfolds

Marisa L. Jennings, MD

I've found that, as a resident in psychiatry, it's rare to experience a moment of truly unbridled achievement while on call. Manning the revolving door of acute psychiatric admissions can be frustrating, not to mention unfulfilling. Maybe that's why accomplishing a small miracle, you might say, while on call recently felt so satisfying.

Broken window = workplace woes

When working a 12-hour shift, especially overnight, it's important to have an environment that is conducive to work. As fatigue and stress build, physical comfort means a lot.

Our problem finding physical comfort in the psychiatry resident call room at Saint Louis University was that a fixture on one of the windows had been broken for several years. You could push the window open, but you could not close it. If you called the janitor, he would come and close the window, but there was no guarantee when he'd show up. You might end up typing your notes all evening in the path of a chilly stream of air.

The residents had made a formal request to have the window repaired in a more permanent manner, but this resulted in it being bolted shut. That was a solution, but an imperfect one: Now we had no way to cool the call room in the winter, and it was beginning to smell of body odor.

The psychiatry resident call room is one of the nicer ones I've seen, but the build-

ing it occupies is a few decades old, and no replacement parts were available for the fixtures. We were stuck with a closed window—so I thought.

That miraculous morning

I was supervising an intern one Saturday, and she had not been paged yet to see patients. The call room was a mess; I telephoned housekeeping to have the beds changed, and maintenance to unclog the sink. When the maintenance man (I'll call him "Tom") arrived and fixed the sink, I praised him and asked him to take a look at the window.

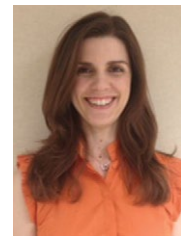
"It's my dream," I said to no one in particular, "to have a window we can open and shut."

I didn't get angry or exert pressure. Tom explained to me that there were no replacement parts.

"Hmm... I see..." I said.

To my delight, Tom seemed excited to be given a problem to solve. He left to pilfer parts from other windows on the floor.

No luck. The parts were all gone. Tom apologized and suggested we purchase a suction cup, with a cord attached, to pull the window closed.



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Disclosure

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Clinical Point

Knowing that I can influence my work environment is essential

"Good idea!" I said, thanking him as he went on his way.

But 2 hours later, our maintenance hero, Tom reappeared in the doorway.

"I've been thinking about your window all morning," he announced.

Tom approached the window, unbolted it, and screwed one end of a chain into the frame, creating a makeshift handle. He demonstrated how to pull the window shut.

Voilà! A window we could open and close. The intern's jaw dropped

in amazement. I turned to dance a little jig.

Satisfaction

It's important to be able to control the temperature in the call room; even more important to have a comfortable, healthy work environment. But knowing I can influence my surroundings to get what I need at work? That's more important than anything else at all.



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