

The Slippery Slope: Navigating Injury, Recovery, and the Realities of Modern Healthcare

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I lay frigid and immobile atop an icy mountain, with Lorde’s “Perfect Places” blasting through my headphones. Multiple skiers rushed towards me and the sounds of “Are you ok!” rang in my ears. Snow filled my mouth and spilled out my ski goggles and my body felt cold and numb. I whispered “No!” as I pounded the powder with my fist, unable to understand what had happened in the past thirty seconds, unsure of how I’d contact my parents, who were roughly 8000 miles away.

I tried to piece the story together; I was skiing down an icy blue run, and the edge of my ski caught on the lack of snow, causing me to tumble over myself and roll down the mountain repeatedly. I swear I heard my knee pop, or maybe I convinced myself it did. This older couple was waiting at the side and immediately came over to assist me, taking off my skis and turning me upright. They informed me that my fall was quite ungraceful and looked particularly painful (well yes, it was!). Thankfully, they waited with me until the ski patrol arrived.

Shivering and wet, covered in multiple layers of blankets, the nurses took me in for an X-ray. They had to manipulate my body, as I did to my Barbies as a child, in various positions to get the correct images since I was unable to move for myself. Afterward, I was sitting in bed when my middle school best friend texted me asking where I had disappeared. I then sent her a 0.5 selfie of me sitting in a hospital gown at the ski resort emergency room. I tend to

use humor to cope with trauma. Her dad, Norm, immediately drove over from the condo and sat by my bedside; he gave me company for hours even though he despises hospitals and thinks the medical system is corrupt. After sitting and conversing with Norm for six hours, the doctor told me I may have torn my Anterior Cruciate Ligament (ACL)—may have.

“The goal of medicine is taking care of the whole person—not just their condition or injury.”

Our healthcare system tends to ignore the person and human experience. Instead, it treats (or attempts to treat) health-related problems. Treatment can feel impersonal and contributes to the distrust citizens feel toward the medical field. Many patients have received misleading information, have been mistreated or even ignored in one way or another. According to a poll on how Americans rate U.S. healthcare, “less than half of Americans are complimentary about the quality of healthcare, with 48% rating it “excellent” or “good.” So why do we continue to put trust in our healthcare system? People pay thousands of dollars to get mediocre care due to the way the system is set up. Many people recovering from major issues or injuries are left discouraged and hopeless. Recovery is largely a mental battle since you have to push through the physical limitations and allow yourself to be vulnerable. However, this is difficult when some doctors treat you with the intention of “getting

through the day” rather than trying to support their patients, find the best possible solution, and provide an excellent level of care.

I sat in the emergency room for hours, only for the doctor to tell me I may have torn my ACL—may have. I think I could have told myself that (and so could anyone else) with a simple Google search. I (well, more so my parents) paid thousands of dollars for my time in the ER, which mainly consisted of hours upon hours of waiting. I got sent home with a brace and crutches and was told to follow up with an orthopedic surgeon. So I did just that. Dr. H, my orthopedist, examined my leg for less than five minutes and reiterated that I may have torn my ACL—may have (it’s always “may have”). He informed me that it was not his specialty and that I should get an MRI and yet another follow-up with another doctor who specializes in sports-related injuries. So again, I did what I was told and wondered if any of the various appointments were skippable. I wasted sixty dollars and two hours of my time to get no clarification. Surprise, I was in for even more appointments which gave me little hope and more confusion. As a pre-medical student trying to navigate the intersections of the healthcare system and my studies, I realized I’d have to create my own path to recovery, straying from the typical route.

“The good doctor understands that as humans we are all susceptible to the same vulnerabilities, fears, temptations, and frustrations as anyone else.”

Pre-medical students, with hopes of pursuing careers in healthcare, are constantly discouraged by the medical professionals they interact with. I have shadowed six physicians; only two mentioned they enjoyed their careers and recommended I pursue medicine. Doctors have to be resilient to endure years of school and training which I understand is tiring and wears down the mental and physical body. “Researchers discovered only 57.5 percent of physicians said they would choose to become

a physician again, compared to 72.2 percent of Physicians in 2020.” However, as a Generation Z student, I believe the younger generation of pre-medical students have lived in a world encompassed by mental health issues. Combined with the experiences and burnout the older generation of doctors has faced, this has brought awareness to the conversation surrounding mental health in the medical industry. Integrating better levels of healthcare with more encouragement from previous generations could combat this ever-changing quality of healthcare, improve outcomes, and create a positive environment for future medical professionals.

I haven’t told the majority of my friends and family about the injury since the constant sympathy and external words of encouragement have made me feel worse about my condition. My family group chat made plans for a winter ski reunion. I mentioned my injury, proposing we push off skiing to next year and my cousin brutally stated, “You can just stay in all day and make sure dinner is ready on time.” I sat on Facetime with my mom in the gym parking lot, bawling my eyes out because of this comment. It finally sank in; this recovery depended on my mental state. I needed to be resilient, push my boundaries every day, and continue to battle the mental aspects to be stronger than the day before.

My schedule is overwhelmingly packed, as most college students can relate to. However, this injury forced me to slow down and reevaluate my circumstances while also learning to be grateful for what I have and what my body can do. I have an amazing support system. I have a family willing to sacrifice their own needs; they were willing to cram themselves into my apartment just to take care of me. I have friends who check in on me every day. They make sure I still feel involved and go out to enjoy game days, wine nights, and Sunday study sessions in coffee shops. It is crucial to experience these unwanted challenges and I believe this injury

will make me a more sympathetic and caring doctor.

This is the main reason I decided to pursue a career in medicine. I want to be someone my patients see as a source of hope, not fear. I do not want to be someone they dread seeing every few months but someone they seek help from, whom they can confide in, and who will stick by them and help them conquer any challenges life throws their way.

Now, nearly a year later, I have gone through two leg surgeries, seen three different physical therapists for one to two appointments a week, every week, and have spent hours every single day rehabbing and strengthening my leg. It's difficult to relay the feelings of discouragement I have endured for days on end when I still cannot make a full turn of the pedals on a bicycle, lift four pounds on the leg extension, or balance on one leg. I also cannot sit criss-cross applesauce, which has affected my comfortability deeply. I needed my doctors to be supportive and empathetic. I needed my physical therapists to be encouraging and to challenge me so this injury would not consume me both mentally and physically. The importance of a good healthcare team who understood me and my needs was ever-changing in this prolonged recovery. From a torn ACL and meniscus to a rare Cyclops lesion that formed numerous bands of scar tissue around my knee, this injury has pushed me far out of my comfort zone and continues to challenge me as I navigate a new version of life I never expected to meet.

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