

Stay Out of the “Teachers’ Lounge”

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You have to be vigilant, or the complainers will eat you alive.

“Stay out of the teachers’ lounge,” warned the experienced high school teacher. “They’ll eat you alive in there.”

This advice, given to me 16 years ago, has been of surprising help to me in my busy clinical practice. Before going to medical school, I was a public high school teacher. As part of my orientation to the school, I was paired with an experienced teacher who was supposed to “break me in.” As she led me through the school rules and policies, she paused to pronounce her solemn warning. She advised

hardships, debates about who was getting away with what and laments about the number of days until the end of the school year.

Do you have a place like this at your clinic – a room, a hallway or a station that attracts the complainers, the soul-suckers and the burned-out staff? Are you one of them?

Every fall I have the great privilege to teach six first-year medical students in a small-group setting. They are so earnest, so sure that they will make a difference. And they are eager to learn.

I, on the other hand, race to the medical school from the clinic across town, usually arriving out of breath but close to being on time. At the start of the session, my mind is cluttered with pressing patient concerns, annoyance at

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me that the teachers’ lounge would be filled with angry, burned-out teachers who would complain and gripe. They would spend every day counting down the days until summer vacation, starting on the very first day of school.


I envisioned the teachers’ lounge as a smoke-filled, dimly lit room where angry, polyester-clad math teachers sat drinking black coffee while throwing darts at pictures of troublesome students and administrators. Imagine my pleasant surprise the first time I timidly ventured in to use the microwave at lunch. The room was well lit, smoke-free and populated with nicely attired teachers. It looked much like the break room at many clinics I’ve visited.

However, as I waited for the painstakingly slow microwave to heat my food, I listened carefully to the conversation. My mentor had been right. I heard complaints and

my lab tech and general irritability about how hard I’m working. Though I have physically avoided our “teachers’ lounge” all day, my mind is in a lounge of its own making.

Colleagues have wondered why I teach these students. Why take on the additional work? I have come to realize that teaching students is my anti-“teachers’ lounge.” This is where I go to remember why my job is so amazing. The older and more cynical I find myself growing, the more I need to fight the teachers’ lounge – both at the clinic and in my own mind. I don’t smoke or throw darts, but I have been known to drink black coffee and I sometimes find polyester oddly attractive. Clearly, I have to be vigilant.

I hope my colleagues can find their own antithesis to the teachers’ lounge – the joy in their job that keeps them going. Every workplace has challenges, no doubt. But when a workplace atmosphere is more about complaining than about correcting problems, joy seems hard to find.

So, I am passing on this sage advice in the hope that joy can flourish at your workplace. Stay out of the teachers’ lounge. They’ll eat you alive in there. 

About the Author

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