



Reflections

One Step at a Time

Shafaq Nazia Shaikh

As I sit down in my chair at the clinic, I catch a glimpse of the clock hanging on the wall in front of me. It is 4 PM. I still have a few hours to go before I can call it a day. Luckily, I have a large mug of coffee sitting on my desk, ready to be consumed. This mug was gifted to me by a friend who I have not seen in months. I just don't have the time. And yet, the day feels so long that I wonder when it's going to end.

The smell of the coffee dances around my nose, almost like a reminder that it is getting cold. It will be my third (or fourth) cup for today. To balance out the caffeine mania rushing through my veins, I will top it off with a cup of chamomile tea just before bed.

I take a sip. It has no milk or sugar. It is unsightly and dark. Just like the circles around my eyes. I have applied quite a portion of my hard-earned wealth in the form of serums, but these just won't budge. I pull out a compact mirror from my bag to see if they have, miraculously, decided to finally part ways but they are as stubborn as a toddler refusing to take a nap.

As I put the mirror back in my bag, I see a half-eaten chocolate bar. I had forgotten to finish it earlier as I had to rush to the ER. I know this is no alternative to a proper meal, but if it's any consolation, it has got nuts and magnesium. At that moment, the aroma of coffee hits me with a sudden realization. The only "nut" in this equation is me!

Who am I kidding? This whole day feels like a failed attempt at a healthy lifestyle. Just like every single day in the past.

I am a physician. I advocate a healthy lifestyle. I engage in conversations on how making smart choices can make significant improvements in one's health. And this doesn't need to be done overnight. All that is required is one step at a time. Every patient takes this advice in their own, unique way. Some listen, some follow, some ignore, and some argue. But what about myself? Do I practice what I preach?

I often emphasize eating a balanced diet containing vegetables and fruits (this does not include the coconut and raisins in your chocolate). I encourage home-cooked meals and discourage take-outs.



However, I am guilty of grabbing easy snacks and labeling them as my meals. If only I had a dollar for every time I missed a meal, I would have built myself an empire by now. If you are what you eat, then I'm erratic. Just like my sleeping habits.

As a doctor, I am fully aware of the long and short-term risks of sleep deprivation. But still, I often find myself caught in a whirl of tossing and turning in bed at night. The major reason behind this is the excessive consumption of caffeine throughout the day. It does nothing but increase my heart rate during the day and turns me into an anxious owl at night. There is an interesting study in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* that finds that sleep deprivation triggers a strong desire to seek high-carbohydrate foods during the daytime. So when you have not had a restorative sleep, you don't just look and feel tired, you make unhealthy food choices, no matter how many nuts are involved.

As I am lost in my thoughts, my fitness band pings. It is complaining I am 5000 steps short of my goal, which is ironic because I have already taken my daily

morning walk. My work involves either standing while I take the rounds or sitting while I run the clinics. I am running for my goals and chasing my dreams, but this kind of movement is just figurative. I need to be moving an actual muscle. I am not a marathon runner but I do take the walks regularly. What I need is to gain strength, flexibility, and balance so that my older self can thank me later.

I dismiss the notification and stand up to take a few steps but a patient enters right that very minute, holding a very thick file in his hands. Hypertension, diabetes, dyslipidemia. He is not the only patient with this story. Sadly, there are many others with the same complaints waiting to be seen. To be given medicines, but not a piece of advice. They have been told to eat healthy, and to exercise many times before, they remember it by heart. Some even nudge the advice away, insisting on tablets. Do I want to end up with a thick file of my own? Certainly not!

Once the patient leaves, I glance at my mug. I never got the chance to finish the coffee. I push it to the side. I realize it is not caffeine and willpower that will get me through the day. It is a good night's sleep that will. Maybe from tomorrow, I will use this mug to hold my pens and pencils. One step at a time!

After some time, the clinic ends. I pick up my stuff and head home. I have many missed calls and unread messages from friends and family, who I have not seen in ages. Ever since work, my social circle has shrunk basically to my cats, who are shockingly not interested in my problems. Healthy living is not just about green leafy vegetables. It is about balance. And socializing plays a pivotal role that often gets ignored. A good conversation is as essential as a good meal, a good workout, and a good nap.

In that instant, I realize I am stuck in a routine and all days feel identical, lacking equilibrium. While cutting down sugar and taking walks is great, there is much more to living a healthy life. It reminds me of The Blue Zone project that identifies regions where people have significantly longer and healthier lives focusing on social engagement, connection with nature, and a strong sense of purpose, in addition to plant-based diet and physical activity.

We, doctors, live under constant stress, giving out the best energy to others and leaving the scraps for ourselves. To truly care for our patients, we must start by taking care of ourselves. After all, patients trust doctors who lead by example, practicing what they preach.