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# Introduction

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“At least you’ll be married to a doctor.”

If you are in a committed relationship with a medical student, and someone has not already said this to you, just wait, because someone will.

At times people say it flippantly, at times jokingly, and at times jealously. But what do they really mean?

I always think they mean that regardless of your present reality, at least your partner will provide you with financial security in the future. I can never seem to find another interpretation. At best this is accidentally insulting, insinuating that financial gain motivates you. Much worse, it can leave you and any bystanders with some rather uninformed messages about medical school.

This statement assumes that the end result of becoming a doctor is worth the means of going through med school. This can come from two different perspectives. Some people assume that becoming a doctor takes less work than it actually does, so they believe that the ‘end is worth the means’ because the ‘means’ involved minimal effort. On the other hand, some people know the challenges involved in this process, but they believe that everything that occurs along the way is worth the struggle because it will result in such a desirable end goal.

Both of these conceptualizations have potentially damaging implications if you are trying to manage an intimate relationship while in med school. In reality, the path to becoming a doctor takes a great deal of work, and while the end result may be worth some of the means taken to get there, it is certainly not worth all means. This has even more significance if a med student is in a committed relationship because then any means taken impact not only his own life, but his partner’s life as well.

After hearing the above statement uttered by so many well intended but misguided people, I have developed this standard response: “If I wanted to be married to a doctor, I would have married a doctor... not a med student”.

Herein lies the purpose of this book.

Medical school is frequently seen not only as an educational experience, but also as a rite of passage, permitting the successful to earn the coveted title of Doctor. If your goal is to be a doctor, you go to medical school. You work ridiculously hard

and do everything in your power to not lose this opportunity. You deal with the long hours, the constant studying, the lack of sleep, the fear of not knowing if you know enough, and the absence of pleasure and leisure in your life because this is your dream, and in order to reach your dream, you need to complete medical school.

Some of us do not want to become doctors, though. Some of us do not have to go to medical school to fulfill our dreams, and yet we still find ourselves seriously impacted by this process. We are the significant others of medical students.

It is hard to have a relationship with one member in medical school. At times it feels absolutely impossible. For some couples it takes too much work for it to feel worthwhile. Others find it worth the hard work and find a way to continue to grow, even in spite of and sometimes because of the obstacles on this path.

I chose to write this book because my husband and I were fortunate and found a way to make our relationship work through med school. We know other couples that made it work, but we also know couples that did not. At one point, a friend of mine half jokingly suggested that I write a book on this subject, and that resonated with me. As a therapist, I like to bring useful resources to people in difficult situations, and as the significant other of someone in med school, I liked to talk about being the significant other of someone in med school! I knew I was not the only one who struggled with this role, and so I decided to share my experiences with others in the hopes that it might provide some help along the way.

I did not write this book as an expert or researcher. I present very few concrete facts to you. As I said, I am a therapist, so I may have above average emotional awareness and relational understanding, but that is the biggest claim at ‘expertise’ I am willing to make in this book. My training and work as a therapist have certainly impacted my perspective and interpretation of what transpires in our relationship, and I am sure that will be evident in my writing. However, I wrote this book primarily as a member of a relationship impacted by medical school.

I wrote this book for the significant others in relationships with medical students because I wish someone had been able to better prepare me. I wrote this book for medical students in relationships because I wish someone had been able to better prepare my husband. I also wrote this book for me. Medical school impacted my life in many ways, and this book helps me to feel a very personal benefit for having lived through this period of time.

This book contains parts of our story. It also contains pieces of the stories of couples we know. From these experiences, I present to you the lessons we have learned, and continue to learn, along the way. Relationships are ever growing, and so this book is not a how-to manual, and it has no magic ending. My goal is to provide some illumination about what to expect. I want to explore the process of how and when the difficult times emerge, and I want to present you with some steps, skills, and perspectives that can help you traverse through these difficult times. We are a couple committed to making it, and we have had to learn many lessons along the way. I pres-

ent them to you in the hopes that they can benefit you in some way and ease your journey down this difficult, though not impossible, path.

Part One of this book provides an introduction to the process of medical school and medicine as well as a brief introduction to my husband and me. Part Two explores in detail the often unexpected yet extremely powerful relational changes and emotional experiences that can occur when your med student deals with the most overwhelming and demanding parts of med school. Part Three outlines a variety of concepts, perspectives, tools, and strategies that you can use to start moving your relationship away from a stress driven system and toward a healthier balance. Part Four specifically addresses the ultimate shift back to a more equal and sustainable relationship. Part Five looks toward the future by considering the process of residency, making future plans, and addressing some more macro level concerns.

I would like to leave you with a couple of notes. Throughout this book I will generally refer to the med student as ‘he’ and to the significant other as ‘she’. I do this solely because this is how it exists in our relationship and I needed shorthand. The concepts in this book are not restricted to relationships only with this particular gender configuration. Further, I will frequently refer to “your med student” as meaning ‘the med student in your relationship’. Again, I needed shorthand and do not mean for you to interpret this in any other way.

Sections of this book primarily address the significant other; some directly address the med student, and other parts ad-

dress both together. I have done this for emphasis and to help bring awareness to the fact that certain components will have specific use to the significant others or to the med students. However, I strongly encourage both members of the relationship to read the entire book in order to gain the fullest possible understanding of what can transpire for you and your partner both as individuals and together as a unit during this challenging time.