Greetings as we all learn to reframe our lives during these unprecedented times. Recognizing that working from home and returning to office work safely are both challenging, the Faculty Assembly Steering Committee has launched this initiative to provide resources for faculty and staff to foster our collective well-being.

Editor: Greg Schneider, MD

What I Learned in Junior High . . .

Perhaps you’ve been in a Zoom meeting recently, likely with people you don’t know quite as well, and you felt like you didn’t fit in. The “cool kids” dominated the conversation and shared jokes you didn’t quite understand. You weren’t even sure why you were there, except perhaps to bring back memories from junior high school, when you were convinced you didn’t belong.

The climate of working during a pandemic, especially working so often through a device or computer screen, has upset so many of the assumptions we bring into the office, the classroom, and even the clinic. Overturning those assumptions has exposed more fundamental needs like the simple recognition that we are flawed people (and in my case a bit neurotic) trying our best to work together. When we focus on meeting our most fundamental needs — including a sense of belonging — it can transform the work and school environment. It can foster collaboration, focus, productivity, even peace of mind.

If I learned anything in junior high, it is that while we can do things that exclude, we can also do things that help people feel welcome and included. Certain gestures and behaviors can go a long way. There are those rare souls that embody such ways of being in the world that they make people feel included. They make sure to solicit everyone’s input and to recognize others, from a simple greeting to a celebration of other people’s successes and achievements. They create connection and camaraderie.

Beyond gestures and behaviors are more profound streams of connection that can help as well. When people are engaged in projects together that have meaning and purpose, not only can it make for better outcomes but it helps bond the participants. Starting by articulating goals, whether for a meeting or for a longer-term endeavor, brings people together around a common enterprise.

In addition to feeling excluded at times in junior high, I also managed to make two of my longest-term friendships. Our bond might have started from the three of us all feeling a bit on the outskirts of the main stream, but it quickly grew from there. Years of running and hiking later, we have all attended each other’s weddings, supported each other in different struggles, and reached out to acknowledge small triumphs. Naturally, most of our workplace relationships will not become as connected as long-term friendships, but we can all do what we can to help one another feel welcome and included.
When I think about belonging, two things jump to mind: imposter syndrome and recognizing universality and humanism. Imposter syndrome (IS) is the “phenomenon where high-achieving individuals are unable to internalize their accomplishments and instead fear that they will be exposed as frauds.” IS has been a constant companion for me throughout my education and career. In some ways, it’s been useful in that it has driven me to do a lot! However, it’s not actually useful in terms of living a fulfilling life. That voice that’s so worried others will figure out that I don’t belong is malignant and insatiable. What I find so interesting about IS is that I cannot outrun it. Every accomplishment I make to try to prove it wrong is actually like a hit of an addictive substance, temporarily holding my IS at bay, but I know it’s just going to return. Actions and achievements only seem to feed it. So, I have done a lot of work around it! If I were to look at my accomplishments when listed under somebody else’s name, I’d think wow, they’ve done so much, of course, they belong in this group. But, when attached to my name, I discount these accomplishments. “First generation students are particularly susceptible to IS.” That makes a lot of sense with me. No one in my family has been a doctor and my parents were the first in their respective families to go to college.

So, how can we work on our own IS and help our students to work with theirs? This article on Very Well Mind outlines specific strategies. One of the most effective for me has been to look at my accomplishments as if I was a third party. This is really useful with separating feelings from facts. Another helpful tool outlined here is to call them out and accept these fraudulent feelings; exposing them to the light of day shows them to be the flimsy shadows that they actually are.

This Winds of Change article also offers tools. They recommend moving beyond talk so that we don’t get stuck there. Also, being patient and persistent resonates with me; I love the idea that with patience, I can “embrace” my “awesomeness!”

My favorite tool is knowing that the very recognition of IS means that I’m not an imposter and that I do belong! This Cleveland Clinic article says it well: “True imposters don’t have this feeling.”

Many of our students face IS as well. We can help them through inclusive teaching. Being transparent about expectations, using diverse examples, promoting a growth mindset, modeling inclusive language, and striving to be fair are some strategies offered. Also, high achieving folks with IS talking about their feelings of not belonging can help students know that they are not alone and can serve as role models for working through IS.

Let’s talk about humanism and recognizing universality. This is so important for me to understand that I belong and that I am a part of. We are all humans with similar organs, blood, tissue all based on the same genetic building blocks. We are each unique in how those blocks are laid out, but that doesn’t negate our commonalities, our shared humanity. We’ve been through a rough year plus with politics, the viral pandemic, and our ongoing racism pandemic all shifting tectonically to expose our societal fault lines. We see where we differ. News agencies and political parties have fostered a sense of division. Yet, if we step back and really look at our issues, we actually agree on a lot.

This idea of our shared values can be seen in ranked choice voting. In 2018, I listened to a podcast that presented a method of voting in which voters rank their votes for each candidate and if no person wins a majority, votes are redistributed when the lowest vote-earner is removed. This technique actually encouraged candidates to move to the middle, where we share a lot of common values!

Years ago, I reviewed a book about religious traditions and was so impressed with commonalities. “Though details differed across faiths, I appreciated the unifying themes of forgiveness, suffering, consequences, resurrection, and death as a natural part of life.” In medical school, I experienced a sentinel moment in the gross anatomy lab as I stood looking at the bodies. I realized that beneath varied skin tones were the same muscles, organs, nerves, and vessels. We were all just human. At the end of the day, we all belong because we are all just human. I carry this value of inclusion into my work at the HWCOM, valuing inclusion, equity, respect, and integrity. I’m so grateful to work with folks sharing these principles. At the end of the day, we are just human.