

Jimmy Turner:

Did you know that most people turn into mind readers when they have been around someone for long enough? This ability to read minds is one of the most common reasons we argue at work and at home. Keep listening to learn where this comes from and how to fight back so you can learn to fight fair.

Jimmy Turner:

This is The Physician Philosopher podcast. I'm Dr. Jimmy Turner, an anesthesiologist, personal finance blogger, and life coach for doctors. The Physician Philosopher podcast teaches you how to create the life that you deserve, one thought at a time. Start before you're ready. Start by starting. Start now.

Jimmy Turner:

Hey, hey, hey, everyone. Welcome to episode number 13 of The Physician Philosopher podcast, where we take an uncurated and unapologetic look into physician life. Today's thought is this. When we do not have all of the details in a story, our very powerful mind will fill in the gap with stories. At home and at work, this can lead to major problems, and the solution is to adopt what is called the doctrine of charity. So we're going to dive into it. We're going to talk all about it today.

Jimmy Turner:

But as we start, I want to keep a couple of fundamental concepts, fundamental truths, inside of your head that often collide in life and cause some major issues. Truth number one is that our brains are very powerful storytellers. So in life, when we have circumstances, situations that happen, there are certain facts that we have, but we usually don't have all of the facts. We usually just have some of them. And so what our brain does is it will actually fill in some of these facts, the gaps in the facts, with stories.

Jimmy Turner:

And we know this is true, and you've actually probably done exercises like this that make it on social media or get shared or proliferated where words will actually have letters missing. And they'll give you a paragraph to read, and you can read the entire thing. The words might be backwards, missing or otherwise not in normal structure, and your brain will read it. And the reason why is because your brain fills in the gaps and allows you to read those words, even though the letters aren't right or they're backwards or whatever. You just fill in the gaps. It's the way that our brain works.

Jimmy Turner:

And it's interesting because our brain doesn't really care what it thinks. It just cares that it's thinking. And so, as you read through those paragraphs or whatever, you will fill in the gaps, and our brain does the same thing in life. We'll have a situation happen. We'll have some facts. And then whatever we don't have, whatever is missing, our brain will fill in. And it's usually not a helpful exercise.

Jimmy Turner:

The second truth that I want you to keep in kind of the back of your mind, as we think through this, is that the longer and more often that you've been around somebody, the more you are probably going to have the thought that you can read their mind, what they were thinking, what their intentions were, because you've known them for 10 or 15 years. And this fact with the other fact that our brain likes to fill in stories causes a situation that is often unhelpful in our lives.

Jimmy Turner:

And there's actually a book out there called Crucial Conversations. It's a really great book, super short read. If you're ever going to have a really tough conversation at home or at work with your boss or with a partner at work, whatever the situation is, this book was really, really helpful for that. So it defines a crucial conversation as having three features, right?

Jimmy Turner:

One is that it's emotionally charged, meaning that there are two people that have feelings about the situation. The second thing is that there is a difference of opinions. So the two people in the conversation don't necessarily agree on what to do or what has happened or whatever the situation is. And the third is that it's high stakes. So the outcome of that conversation is important.

Jimmy Turner:

And you can imagine that most conversations at work and at home fit into this crucial conversation kind of bucket. If you think about the fact that when you're talking to your boss or a partner at work, that's always going to be a high-stakes situation because any conversation has the potential to explode, particularly the emotionally-charged ones. And when that happens, it's high stakes, right? Because you don't want to ruin your relationship with your boss or with your partner at work or with your spouse at home.

Jimmy Turner:

So high stakes, differences of opinions and emotionally-charged, those three things mean that you are in a crucial conversation. And the goal of these conversations, as Brene Brown would say, "I'm here to get it right, not to be right." In other words, it's not about winning. It's about showing up the way that you mean to show up and having a fruitful conversation where the two people end up still being in a good relationship at the end of it, right? Because that's always a goal. Even if that's not what the conversation's about, it's about something completely unrelated, one of your goals is always going to be to come out on the other side of that with a relationship that's intact. So focus on fighting fair and with facts, not with stories that we tell ourselves about the facts, because those end up causing major issues.

Jimmy Turner:

And I'm going to tell you a very personal story here in a second that actually, looking back, led to the rise of The Physician Philosopher. This business has exploded since the situation I'm about to tell you about. But at the time this was a really painful situation. It was something that I

went through that may seem benign when I tell you about it, but at the time, my career was leading up to this point, and something didn't work out.

Jimmy Turner:

So I'm going to tell you about it, knowing that, looking back with the retrospectoscope, hindsight being 2020, that I'm actually extremely glad that it's worked out the way that it has because of what has happened in The Physician Philosopher, in this business, since then. But at the time I didn't have that perspective. And so I'm going to give you an example of what I'm talking about, these stories and facts and make this a little more concrete.

Jimmy Turner:

But for some background, I've been at Wake Forest since medical school. So I started med school in 2008 and have been here since then. Went through med school, residency fellowship. I was the medical school class president, student body president. I ended up being one of two chief residents in residency here. And so I've been in leadership positions my entire time for the last 13 years I've been at Wake. Those were all elected positions though. Those were all things where there was a nomination, there was a vote. And then I became a faculty member and experienced a different world.

Jimmy Turner:

So knowing that as a background, I will tell you that even when I was in training, I had a really strong idea that I wanted to be in the residency leadership at some point, because I love advocating for people. I love advocating for residents. I love advocating for medical students. I love teaching. I love leading. And so for lots of reasons, I kind of always imagined my career going that direction. An assistant program director position opened up, it became available. And in the end, the facts are that I wasn't chosen. Those are the facts.

Jimmy Turner:

And so at the time, I didn't really have the perspective that I have now, but I set up some meetings to talk to the people that made the decision to figure out what had happened, why I wasn't chosen, what I could be doing better, if there were any concerns. And those meetings didn't happen for a little while. So I ended up having lots of other meetings with my wife on our back deck, drinking a beer, sorting through my feelings on what had happened. And because I didn't have all of the details, I didn't have all the information, my mind started creating stories.

Jimmy Turner:

All I knew was that I wasn't chosen and that other people were. In fact, there were four spots. I didn't get any of them. And so you can imagine going through this process, having a background that wants to be involved in a position like this and then getting passed up by four other people, it was painful. And I wanted to figure out what was going on. And so that said, I didn't know the information at the time. So I started filling the stories like, well, the residents told the leadership that they wanted me to be in one of these positions. If this was a democratic process, I probably would have gotten a spot.

Jimmy Turner:

Another story I told myself was that Person X, so-and-so, must have a vendetta against me because when I was a resident, they said this or that or whatever. These were all just so unhelpful stories. They went on and on and on. I kept filling in the gap, conspiracy theories, the stories, and all it did was make me extremely angry. That's all it did at the time.

Jimmy Turner:

Now, in the midst of this, I will remind you, I was in full-fledged Graves' disease at the time and didn't know that. So you can imagine that those crucial conversations in the midst of Graves' disease is a great recipe for explosion. But the facts of the circumstance were simple. A position opened up, and I wasn't chosen. Those were the facts. Everything else was really a story.

Jimmy Turner:

And so yet the thoughts that I created by filling in those gaps, filling in those facts, made me so mad. In the end, they simply chose four other people, and what I was telling myself about that situation was truly unhelpful. So the problem is that I didn't have all the facts. I wasn't privy to them, and so my brain filled in all the conspiracy theories and stories with that.

Jimmy Turner:

And maybe that story above doesn't hit close to home for you. Maybe hey, you've never been passed up for a leadership position. You've always gotten all the leadership positions that you wanted or whatever your situation is. Maybe I'll tell you another story about something recently that happened at home. So I've got three kids, my oldest little girl, Grace, she's the one that reads the disclaimer for the show. And she is just enamored with L.O.L. dolls right now. I don't know if you have kids their age, but L.O.L. dolls. They're all about it.

Jimmy Turner:

So they build these dollhouses with these L.O.L. things. And my two younger kids were wrestling, and one of them fell on top of one of her L.O.L. dollhouses that she was building in the middle of the floor. And as soon as it happened, the first thing that Grace screamed and truly screamed at her brother was, "I'm so mad at you. You meant to do that." And it's really interesting that she said those words, "You meant to do that," because it implies that she can read her brother's mind.

Jimmy Turner:

And this is something that we all do, whether it's me reading the mind of the people that made the decisions about the assistant program director position that I got passed up on, or it's Grace reading the mind of her little brother who just fell on top of her L.O.L. dollhouse and says that you meant to do that. We all think that we can read people's minds, right?

Jimmy Turner:

And I'll tell you I'm an anesthesiologist. So this happens all the time with surgeons. They did X, and it's because of Y, and I've worked with them for so long I know what they're thinking. It's all unhelpful. All of this comes from filling in facts when a situation happens. They're very unhelpful.

And so when it comes to colleagues at work or family members at home, a fundamental question that you want to ask yourself, you remember that crucial conversation that teaching at the beginning, right? The Brene Brown idea that you're here to get it right, not to be right, is that, how would you want to act and feel towards those people? Whether it's a situation at home or a situation at work. And does your mind reading or your thought that you can read minds help you? Obviously, the answer is fundamentally no. You want to keep a relationship intact. You thinking that you can read someone else's mind and you know why they did what they did is not going to be a way to keep that situation in tack.

Jimmy Turner:

So how do you get around that? How do you get around that our brains are powerful storytellers and that they want to fill in gaps in facts and stories in situations when they happen? Well, there's something that I teach my clients called the doctrine of charity. And in good responsibility, I need to give this true credit. So I learned this from my philosophy professor when I was an undergrad. His name's John Wingard. And Dr. Wingard had this idea, and the way that he applied this was to philosophy papers. Because as you can imagine in written word, and we see this all the time, where people's words get taken out of context or they're misinterpreted, not the way that the author originally intended, well, in philosophy papers that happens a lot because you're talking about very big abstract ideas, philosophical principles of different philosophers, so on and so forth.

Jimmy Turner:

And so Dr. Wingard had this doctrine of charity. And for a philosophy paper, as a professor at a undergrad, the way that he used this was he was going to assume the best possible thing that you could have meant with the words that you wrote on the paper. So if they could be interpreted multiple different ways, he would interpret it in the best possible way he could because he wanted to be charitable to the person who wrote it. The doctrine of charity. And this thing is amazing.

Jimmy Turner:

So I've gone on to apply this in so many areas of my life, but the idea behind it is this. Remind yourself of the facts, not the stories that you tell yourself about the facts, just the facts, the things that two lawyers in court would agree upon. Remind yourself of the facts. If it's helpful, which it almost always is, write it down. Write down everything about a situation that you're going through, you're having a hard time with. Write out all of the thoughts, all of the things, and then go back and circle the facts. And you're going to find out that they are very, very few. Lots of stories, very few facts.

Jimmy Turner:

And when you realize that, you're going to say, "Okay, these are the facts. And all of this other stuff are thoughts that I get to choose to think. And I can choose to think that I know what that other person was thinking, or I could ask myself questions." Is it possible that they meant something different than what you thought they originally did? So the idea is write down the

facts, separate that from the stories. And then the second, the doctrine of charity, is to assume the very best intention that could be possible out of that given situation.

Jimmy Turner:

So here's what I mean. In the examples I gave above, right, the assistant program director position, is it possible that there are other people who are well-suited for that position? Obviously, right? That is just so true and easy to believe because it's true. There are lots of people in my department, my amazing department filled with wonderful faculty members, that could do that job and do it really, really well. In fact, the people that they chose are such people.

Jimmy Turner:

And so another question I started asking myself, is it possible that they would be better at the job in the eyes of the people that made the decision? Yes, that's absolutely possible, right? Maybe they had a different skill set. Maybe they had different strengths that I don't have in the eyes of the people that made the decision. Maybe it was just a very reasonable decision to make based on the information that they had. Is it possible they were just trying to do what was best in their eyes, in the minds of the people that made the decision? Yes, absolutely.

Jimmy Turner:

And when I think these thoughts, I'm like, "Oh, maybe there isn't some giant conspiracy theory. Maybe so-and-so doesn't have a personal vendetta against me. They just felt like someone was better for the job." And that is a lot easier to swallow than the stories that I told myself about the very few facts in that situation. And when I assume the doctrine of charity, that the people who made that decision did so for the best outcome for the residents that they were filling this position to lead, man, that makes me feel so much better. Doesn't it?

Jimmy Turner:

Or what about Grace's situation, right? When Wesley, my little boy, tripped and landed on her L.O.L. dollhouse. Is it possible that Wesley simply tripped while wrestling with his little sister, that he didn't even realize her dollhouse was there right behind him? Is it possible that he actually feels really bad about breaking her dollhouse? All those things are true. And when we go back and ask ourselves those questions and fill them in with other thoughts that those questions produce, is it possible that they meant something different than the way that you're interpreting it, it immediately releases you from so much of that anger or frustration or whatever negative emotion you have going on. And the reason why is because you're telling yourself a different story. And we get to choose the stories that we fill in the gaps with.

Jimmy Turner:

So there are facts. And remember, there are often very few. The stories that we tell ourselves in between those facts to fill in the gaps, that is a choice. And so when you realize that you can choose to think a different thought and that that thought is going to result in you not being angry in that situation, why wouldn't you choose that? When we separate the facts from our stories and then choose a different thought, is it possible? What if they meant something different than

what you originally realized? What if you realized that you, in fact, cannot read minds? You do not know the intention of someone else unless they tell you.

Jimmy Turner:

I was doing this because of X, Y, and Z. Until those words come out of their mouth, you are implicitly stating that you think you can read minds, which maybe there are people out there that have that ability. It's certainly not me. I don't have that ability. So it makes it a lot easier to cope with these things when we're having a difficult situation at work, when so-and-so shows up late for our shift that they're supposed to relieve us, and we were working nights and they're supposed to be there at such-and-such a time and they show up 45 minutes, an hour late.

Jimmy Turner:

Maybe there's a reason why they did that. Maybe it's not because they don't respect your time or they don't appreciate who you are, or they're not thinking about you. Maybe something else happened. As soon as we ask ourselves, "Is it possible that," and fill in the blank with something else that seems very reasonable in that situation, that doesn't involve you reading their mind and them having malice in their heart toward you, you will feel so much better.

Jimmy Turner:

So if we can assume the very best out of people when they say something, when they do something and not make it mean something else, because we get to decide what we make it mean when someone says something to us, right? And it can be even very, very straightforward things like, "Hey, have you worn that before?" And then we make that mean, "Oh, they think my clothes are ugly," when they're honestly just asking you like, "Hey, is that new?"

How you interpret everything that people say is up to you. And so just remember, the doctrine of charity is this idea that you can assume the best of people. And not only will that produce a better relationship. So that in those crucial conversations, when things are emotionally charged, there's differences of opinions, high-stake relationship at work or at home, you get to choose a thought that is going to allow you to get it right, to fight fair and not worry about being right in winning that conversation or proving yourself right or the conspiracy theories that are running amok in your head.

Jimmy Turner:

Today's thought is this. When we do not have all of the details in the story, our very powerful mind will fill in the gaps with stories. At home and at work, this can lead to major, major, major problems. So the solution to this is to adopt the doctrine of charity, to assume the very best of people in whatever they say and whatever they do. And just to ask questions. "Hey, when you said that, what did you mean? When you did X, what was going on in your head? I'm just trying to understand what happened."

Jimmy Turner:

When you ask questions and ask, is it possible that they meant something different than what you initially perceived it as, you will end up being a happier, healthier, and better partner, parent,

physician. So until next time, my friends, start before you're ready, start by starting, start now. I'll see you next week.

Grace Turner:

My dad, Dr. Jimmy Turner, is a physician first, personal finance blogger, and a life coach for doctors. However, he is not your physician or your life coach. He also isn't a financial advisor, financial planner or accountant. Anything discussed in this podcast is for general education and entertainment purposes only. Life coaching is not a substitute for therapy, medicine, or medical treatment. However, if you are a doctor looking for a life coach, you can reach out to my dad at editor@thephysicianphilosopher.com.