

Four of my primary kids died during those three weeks. I would maintain things at work and get upset at home. For one patient, I found out while walking into work the next morning. They were already cleaning his room. I didn't have time to process his death or say goodbye. I had to get back to work. I saw another patient's external cerebral ventricular drain fill up with blood. Next thing I knew, we were all shut out. I didn't really want to debrief what happened in that moment. My anxiety was high. I was in fight mode basically, and trying to be emotional wouldn't work. For another kid who was getting sicker, the family ultimately decided to redirect care. The attending I was with told me, "Stay out of it. Give them space. I'll handle this death stuff." It felt like a slap in the face not to participate in that part of their care. A pre-teen kid died from an intentional drug overdose, and there were two other kids of similar ages that that showed up that night due to drug overdoses. I texted a friend of mine who has a 13-year-old daughter, saying, "Oh god, I'm worried... I don't feel good. This is heartbreaking." I really didn't feel quite like myself. I couldn't explain what I was going through to the non-medical people I was meeting up with. Talking about a seven-year-old who unexpectedly died is just too unspeakably tragic for most people. It's basically taboo. My family had no idea of what I was doing that month, because I didn't want to burden them. Instead, I kept things vague and tried to protect them. I intentionally didn't attend any of the departmental didactic sessions that month, either. I was in such a weird, dark place, it didn't feel right to be around my co-residents. Essentially, I felt removed from the rest of the world, even when I was outside of the PICU.

In the PICU, parents would get really frustrated and took it out on us basically saying, "I don't like residents, and I don't want you to take care of my child." One night, I accidentally gave a kid too much insulin. It was around 4AM. I was doing the math and kept getting interrupted by people for other things. I forgot to divide by two or something. The patient was fine, but I just felt like crap. Also, I was so stressed out about presenting because I knew I was going to get interrupted. One time, I got chastised in front of everybody. Cardiologists would pimp me on things, and I'd be embarrassed answering wrong in front of 15 people. I thought, "Why was I even bothering when it was obviously so far out of my expertise? I'm never going to manipulate a pacemaker without calling one of you to the bedside, first." So, I didn't always feel like I was affecting patient care in a positive way. I felt very little agency. Towards the end, there were days it felt pointless to come to work. It was hard to feel involved and like it mattered being there. I stopped putting as much energy into pre-rounding. I just clicked the little checkboxes. Part of why I felt bad during my rotation was because I felt like I wasn't doing a good job. It became very daunting to show up every morning and try to present when I knew nothing about the patient's physiology. It just felt soul crushing. I understood that sometimes people were in a bad mood, but when everyone was in a bad mood, I'd think, "Uch, I don't want to learn." There were even times I got so frustrated it made me not want to take care of a kid.

I just tried to keep going and get through everything, and at the time I felt tired but fine. But afterwards, things caught up to me. I finished my PICU rotation on a 24-hour call. For the next three weeks, I felt numb, drained, and exhausted – physically, mentally, and emotionally. I had planned on starting some research, but I was totally burnt out. I experienced dysthymia, had decreased energy, slept a little bit longer, and probably had a few more beers than I usually do. I thought I would want to talk about the hard stuff with the counseling center, but, when it was actually over, all I wanted was to put it all in a box on the shelf to deal with later, or never. Still, I ruminated a lot about the PICU cases I saw, mostly while I was walking to work or at home doing other things. I had weird stress dreams about one of my kids who was really sick, or the horrible scenarios I had witnessed, where I would call for help and no one was there and there were labs I needed to follow up on. I felt kind of helpless, but also tried not to reminisce on things that could've gone better. I just wanted to find closure, wrap my head around it and hopefully be done with it. It took a few weeks after the PICU rotation to regain the level of energy I rely on, and interest in doing the things that normally give me joy. I really didn't want to come back to work. Unfortunately, I had to, so I was sort of there, just fed up with people. I was no longer there to learn. I was more there to put in the time and then get the hell out of there. Some residents have a three-week independent study elective after the PICU, to really recuperate without a lot of clinical responsibilities. Without that wash-out period, it's natural to remain a little more irritable, pessimistic, and cynical, to the point where it certainly affects work. Fortunately, the past few weeks have been a lot easier for me, emotionally speaking, because I'm in the trauma ICU now.