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## My six-word story: Power to reconnect and connect

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### Cover Page Footnote

A special thank you to the staff of the Pediatric Emergency Department at NYC Health +Hospitals/ Harlem for their participation and support of My Six-Word Story and for their dedication and commitment over the past several months with the COVID-19 global pandemic. This article is associated with the Staff & Provider Engagement lens of The Beryl Institute Experience Framework. (<http://bit.ly/ExperienceFramework>). You can access other resources related to this lens including additional PXJ articles here: [http://bit.ly/PX\\_StaffProvEngage](http://bit.ly/PX_StaffProvEngage)

## My six-word story: Power to reconnect and connect

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### Abstract

The COVID-19 global pandemic is a threat to the well-being of our healthcare professionals. Recent studies on the mental health effects of healthcare professionals from China and Italy have revealed higher levels of depression, anxiety and psychological distress. As a Pediatric Emergency Medicine physician working on the frontline and a H3 (Helping Healers Heal) Peer Champion, I sought to support my staff's well-being and emotional resilience. My Six-Word Story, a simple and meaningful activity was designed to support the psycho-social well-being of those on the frontline providing care. This new project was implemented in the Pediatric Emergency Department at NYC Health + Hospitals/ Harlem. Six-word stories, a form of micro fiction, have increased in popularity in recent years. The staff participating in the project shared their six-word stories on their inspiration in choosing a career in medicine. After receiving all the submissions, illustrations were added to each story creating a poster story. This project was well received by the staff as it allowed them to be creative, focus on positive thoughts and was not time-consuming. My Six-Word Story is shown to have the power to reconnect with our purpose and connect with each other through common interests, shared beliefs and shared values. This innovative initiative can easily be replicated or adapted to help support the well-being and human experience of all us.

### Keywords

Staff and provider engagement, storytelling, resilience, well-being, COVID-19, healthcare, human experience

### Introduction

There is a parallel pandemic occurring with the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) global pandemic. The National Academy of Medicine describes the surge of physical and emotional harm experienced by healthcare professionals who are caring for COVID-19 patients as a parallel pandemic.<sup>1</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic is a threat to the well-being of our healthcare workforce.

The outbreak of COVID-19 was first reported on December 31, 2019, in Wuhan, China.<sup>2</sup> On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak as a global pandemic.<sup>3</sup> As of June 16, 2020, more than 8.05 million cases of COVID-19 have been reported in more than 188 countries and territories, resulting in more than 437,000 deaths.<sup>4</sup> While it is understood when and how the pandemic started, it is unclear when and how the pandemic will end.

Over the past several months, there has been focused attention on the biology, epidemiology, prevention, diagnosis and treatment of COVID-19. Additionally, it is important to study, address and meet the mental health needs of healthcare workers who are providing acute care for patients with COVID-19 at unprecedented levels. There are increased challenges placed on these healthcare professionals which includes surge in patient care demands, shortages of personal protective equipment, co-

workers becoming ill, lack of necessary medical equipment, fear of infecting family members and the unknown of a new virus.

Several recent studies from countries with high rates of COVID-19 have started to examine the mental health effects of our healthcare professionals. One of the first studies of mental health among clinicians and others caring for patients with COVID-19 was from China with more than 1200 health care workers from 34 hospitals who were surveyed between January 29 to February 3, 2020. Results showed frontline health care workers caring directly for patients with COVID-19 reported higher levels of severe mental health symptoms (depression, anxiety, insomnia, and psychological distress) than those in secondary roles.<sup>5</sup> Another recent study from China observed an increase in mental health symptoms (anxiety, depression) and fear of violence and a decline in mood after the COVID-19 outbreak with a cohort of first year physicians.<sup>6</sup> A cross-sectional study from Italy of healthcare workers showed a substantial proportion of mental health issues (stress-related symptoms and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and insomnia), particularly among young women and frontline staff.<sup>7</sup>

The emotional toll experienced by health care workers treating COVID-19 patients may lead to unfortunate endings. Dr. Lorna M. Breen, who served as the medical director of the emergency department at NewYork-

Presbyterian Allen Hospital died by suicide on April 26, 2020. Following her death, her father said, “She tried to do her job, and it killed her”. He shared how his daughter described devastating scenes of the toll the coronavirus took on patients.<sup>8</sup>

It is vital we support the well-being and emotional resilience of our healthcare professionals amid the COVID-19 global pandemic. By doing so, we will sustain both the level of healthcare workers required and the ability for them to perform at their full potential as we continue to battle this virus.<sup>9</sup>

### Initiative

NYC Health + Hospitals/ Harlem is one of the hospitals in the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States. The Pediatric Emergency Department has faced several challenges including now caring for patients up to twenty-five years of age instead of up to eighteen years of age, co-workers who became ill with the coronavirus, protecting themselves from contracting the coronavirus and recently a new complication associated with COVID-19 and pediatric patients known as Multi-system Inflammatory Syndrome (MIS-C).

Healthcare organizations recognize the importance in supporting the well-being of their healthcare staff. This has included removing barriers to receiving mental healthcare and strategies which build resilience. As a physician working in the Pediatric Emergency Department at NYC Health + Hospitals/ Harlem and a H3 (Helping Healers Heal) Peer Champion, I understood and experienced the emotional toll the pandemic had on the nurses and physicians I worked with. To support my staff's well-being and resiliency, I designed a simple and meaningful activity, *My Six-Word Story*.

Storytelling is a common thread of the human experience which unites the entire world. Its origins can be traced as far back to the beginnings of human existence and is practiced daily in medicine. Healthcare professionals are storytellers who listen to the words spoken by their patients and synthesize them to stories which are shared amongst the healthcare team. Rita Charon, physician and literary scholar, states “[Narrative medicine] is a commitment to understanding patients’ lives, caring for the caregivers, and giving voice to the suffering.” Storytelling is a powerful way to connect with ourselves, patients and other healthcare professionals.<sup>10</sup>

Stories vary in length with a wide range from micro fiction (less than 100 words) to novels (over 17,000 words). In recent years, the six-word story, a six-word sentence that is written to tell a story, has become increasingly popular. The most famous example of a six-word story is by novelist, Ernest Hemingway who according to legend

wrote: “For sale: baby shoes. Never worn.” In just six words, a heartbreaking narrative is told, which evokes emotion and leaves us yearning to learn more.

The staff were invited to submit six-word stories on their inspiration in choosing a career in medicine. Remembering your why is especially important during difficult times. Reconnecting with our purpose maintains our focus as we overcome any crisis. This will help in strengthening our resiliency.

Sharing stories is one of the most powerful ways to make connections and build community among our healthcare teams. Learning about the personal stories of our fellow colleagues reveals our common interests, shared beliefs and shared values.

There was great support and enthusiasm from the staff as the activity was not time-consuming, allowed them to be creative with using only six words and provided a shift in focus away from the pandemic towards positive thoughts. Once I received all the submissions, I added illustration to each story and made a poster story. I surprised the staff with all their stories displayed on a bulletin board (they now call it their Story Board), made prints of their stories for each person and compiled all the stories into a photo journal.

### My Six-Word Stories: Collection of six-word stories from the staff of the Pediatric Emergency Department

#### What inspired you to choose a career in medicine?

*Child of system, now system leader.*

*Making it better: little by little.*

*Sickness, treatment, feel better, go home.*

*Your health is in your hands.*

*Being humane makes you a hero.*

*It is a privilege to serve.*

*For the satisfaction of helping others.*

*Clapping at Seven. Pots, pans too.*

*Mask on, gloves on, sanity off.*

*Ordinary people can do extraordinary things.*

*My healing hands to help others.*

*Indefinite love from my healing hands.*

*Treat patients how you want treated.*

*Less burden, bridge disparity, make change.*

*The change I want to see.*

*I like making sick kids smile.*

*Put yourself in someone else's shoes.*

*Following giant footsteps, making my own.*

*Be strong, Be beautiful, Be you.*

*Health is important, can save lives.*

*Medicine, more about prevention than treatment.*

*Healing takes both time and passion.*

*Without struggle, there is no cure.*

*Be the voice, for those without!*

*Strive to succeed and live better.*  
*Caring others is loving your family.*  
*Inspired by my mom to help.*  
*Potential to positively influence people's lives.*  
*Make a difference in your world.*  
*A new world from little EYES*  
*Helping people less fortunate than me.*  
*You're hurt, You called, We responded.*  
*Healing sick, injured children and adolescents*  
*Helping those who can't help themselves.*  
*Healing sick children, no adults please.*

## Impact

The staff completed an evaluation form of the project with the following three questions:

### Question # 1: Describe how sharing your six-word story made you feel on a personal level.

- The question "why did you get into medicine" has been asked to me hundreds of times at this point but having to explain it in 6 words was a new challenge. Being able to put decades of hard work and dedication into the simplest 6 words was a freeing experience. It takes out all the fluff and fancy adjectives, and lets you explain in the purest terms why you are lucky to be part of a medical team.
- It made me remember how and why I chose my profession. Forced me to remember my why despite everything currently happening during the pandemic and socially.
- Gives me a feeling of accomplishment because I'm finally doing what I love and passionate about.
- In bringing awareness to our own personal history with choosing healthcare as a career, we help center ourselves in times of crisis on our own personal journey.
- Reminded me why I chose nursing as a profession.
- I think having staff share their stories makes them feel more appreciated. (It's also an excellent poetry exercise!)
- Sharing my six-word story personally reminded me of why I chose a career in the healthcare field. Sometimes I tend to forget the reason why I began this journey as a Registered Nurse, and it was nice to reflect on these moments.
- Great. It was a good exercise --- made me stop and reflect on the reasons why I started this journey in the first place.

### Question # 2: Describe how reading and learning about your fellow staff members' stories influenced your working relationship with each other.

- Each individual is very unique in their perception and how they express their emotion which brings diversity in the work environment and togetherness.
- After reading other people's story I felt the different perspectives of this field which is amazing to know.
- I feel like seeing everyone's story was a window into their lives. It allows you to see colleagues' purest intentions and goals for their careers in medicine.
- It was heartwarming to learn everyone's reason for choosing their path to medicine. I think I learned that no matter the reason, we all had a base of wanting to help others in need.
- Reading my staff member' story made feel connected.
- It reminded me that we all decided to pursue careers in medicine to help children. It sometimes gave additional topics to talk about if you asked your colleagues about their 6 words or commented on their 6 words or the accompanying photo.
- Working on this project with coworkers helped to strengthen our interpersonal relationships and bring a sense of belonging together or connectivity in the way we all ended up together.
- I think reading other staff's stories also makes everyone feel more empathy and camaraderie.
- Reading and learning about my fellow staff members' stories allowed me to improve my working relationship with my colleagues. I was able to better understand their reason for pursuing a career as a healthcare worker.
- Inspired by their stories.

**Question #3: Please share your thoughts about your six-word story with added illustrations being displayed in the Pediatric Emergency Department, compiled into a photo journal book and made as individual prints.**

- It is a modern masterpiece of art that demonstrated collaborative thoughts of colleagues translated in a photographic form.
- Seeing the six-word story illustrated and displayed brought everyone's words to life. It took peoples stories from 6 simple words to a story of their motivation and drive in the medical field. Receiving the individual print and seeing the storyboard was tangible evidence of everyone's life mission.
- I thought this was a wonderful addition to the PED. It's perfect for the current pandemic. We have all felt a lot of emotions during this time and I think sadness was an overarching theme, however this piece signified a feeling of conquering/overcoming together.
- The illustration of six-word story made words complete.
- The display gives me a true feeling of pride and joy in my profession and the fantastic team of colleagues who helped each other emotionally and physically through this extremely rough time.
- Individual six-word story displayed in a personal way with visual aides to bring them to life.
- We are all going through a difficult time during this pandemic and the display helps increase morale on the unit.
- I was touched to receive my photo print with my 6 words. It is uplifting to see all the photos in a journal book and on the bulletin board in our PED. I think this is a unifying, uplifting, team building experience.
- It provides us constant motivation visually and verbally.
- Loved it. Is it on Amazon? Because it probably could be.

**Comments:**

"I have always been a proponent of storytelling in engaging staff and influencing behavior, but not until Dr. Puran shared the concept of the Six-Word Story did I fully appreciate the impact of reflection in healing. I have now adopted a new practice of summarizing my day in a Six Word Story, with a direct focus on gratitude."

"This is absolutely beautiful! Thank you for sharing. As a drama therapist and Licensed Creative Arts Therapist, it is so nice to see someone using creativity and the art of narrative. The way you formatted it, the healing that took place throughout the process, all of it – just wonderful."

"This is a beautiful embodiment of the mission of H3: "to Help Healers Heal." Thank you, Alexie, for helping us health care providers heal in a healthy way."

"Thanks so much for carrying the leadership torch forward, especially during this challenging time. I love what you've done with six-word stories – simple reminders of commitment."

"Thank you for doing this. Every doctor or nurse you inspire helps in the healing of everyone they touch. In that way your thoughtfulness is magnified exponentially."

"Oh my.... I am in tears.... literally.... absolutely outstanding, I may just have to steal this project."

**Recommendations**

*My Six-Word Story* is an innovative activity supporting the well-being of those on the frontline providing care to COVID-19 patients. Six words have the power to reconnect us to our why and connect each other as a community. The six-word stories shared by the staff of the Pediatric Emergency Department were creative, meaningful and inspirational. The staff's testimonials support the goals achieved of the project in building resiliency and supporting their well-being. Future studies may use validated resilience scales to assess *My Six-Word Story* to quantify its effects on resilience. Cost was minimal in completing the project and only involved purchasing

prints of the stories and a photo journal book of all the stories.

In summary, My Six-Word Story project has brought joy to my department. I invite you to replicate or adapt My Six-Word Story and help with the well-being of each other.

Everyone has a story. Let's share are our six-word stories, reconnect with our purpose and connect our human experiences.

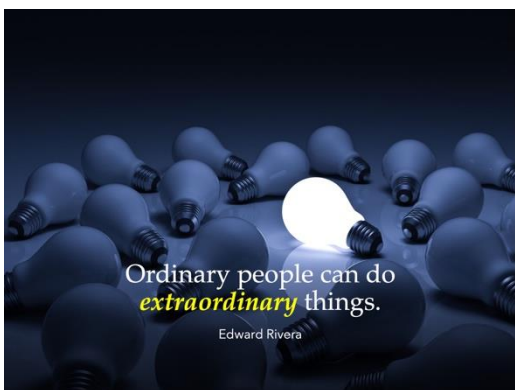
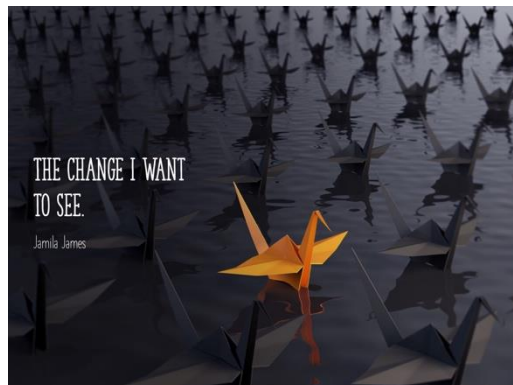
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### Appendix 1: Examples of staff's My Six-Word Stories with added illustrations





Appendix 2. Bulletin Board displaying staff's My Six-Word Stories

