

BOOK REVIEW

BOOK REVIEW: ATTENDING: MEDICINE, MINDFULNESS, AND HUMANITY

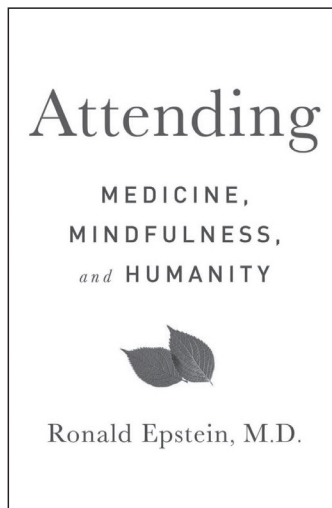
Elisa M. Sottile, MD, FACP

Dr. Sottile (elisa.sottile@jax.ufl.edu) is an assistant professor of medicine at the University of Florida, Jacksonville.

I recently read *Attending: Medicine, Mindfulness, and Humanity* by Dr. Ronald Epstein last fall while preparing for a lecture.¹ I had been tasked to speak to a large group of internists, specialists and trainees about restoring the joy in practice. I had just reread Epstein's 1999 *Mindful Practice*.² In this landmark article, he had proposed that mentoring and guidance is essential for teaching self-awareness and for instilling professionalism. The article prompted me to delve further into his works to find additional material to share with my audience. I almost did not finish my presentation as I became deeply engrossed with the book in my hands. *Attending* was simply inspiring—it compelled me to reflect on my behaviors and my words, and to see the immense potential they hold. I felt validated; quality care is more than applying knowledge—my behaviors and the words I use have the power to build connections and positively impact the quality of care that I provide!

Ronald Epstein is professor of family medicine, psychiatry & oncology at the University of Rochester Medical Center. He has more than 200 publication, most of which touch on communication and mindfulness in healthcare. In this text, he has compiled what might be his life's work in a format that was stimulating, reinvigorating my passion for patient care and helping to deepen my personal relationships. This is a must read for all those in medicine: students, residents, seasoned clinicians, administrators, and educators. In fact, *anyone* who interacts with others would benefit from reading this. Those who are interested in learning how to deepen their relationships with others, or who have interest in teaching others how to do so, should start by reading this volume.

Epstein effectively draws the reader in from the first page, recounting a poignant story that helped shape his future in medicine. The story also begins illustrating the deeper meaning behind his book's title: *attending* is much more than another name for a clinical faculty member



Practicing self-awareness, attentiveness and presence will allow anyone to practice mindfulness, and be *attending*.

Like most internists, I consider myself a good communicator. Why then do I, like others, often feel dissatisfied in practice? In his text, Epstein shares anecdotes of compassionate communicators that have lost fulfillment with their practice. He notes that to become excellent communicators, we must attend to ourselves first. He reminds us, as did Osler, that “we miss more by not seeing than by not knowing.” Practicing self-awareness allows us to

avoid inattention for those we care for and helps us keep our eyes open and notice the unexpected. While attending we do not simply hear our patients' words, we listen and recognize the emotion that begot them.³ Epstein attests and research has supported that mindful practitioners have improved patient outcomes; patients achieve better control of their migraines and blood pressure, and self-monitor their diabetes more closely. As described in the book, practicing presence, even briefly, can often be long enough to avert a potential crisis. Moreover, physicians like myself, can restore their satisfaction.

Through Epstein's effective storytelling, we learn that mindful clinicians still have patients who get angry, get ill, and even die; however, mindful physicians are less likely to be adversely affected by those moments of loss.⁴ The many stories expertly woven within his text are far more than mere illustrations of his theories, they reflect our shared humanity. The characters are real, they lived, breathed, suffered and some even died. Once we are attentive, we can learn from the characters themselves, priming us for Epstein's elegant teaching. Whether lay person or medical professional, we are moved by these individuals; with the author's help, we recognize their pain, hope, fear, and longing. One individual, an intensivist, deliberately attempts to stimulate a patient who had been

continued on page 2

**BOOK REVIEW** (continued from page 1)

unresponsive for five days, while closely monitoring his EEG; he thus ascertains that stimuli were getting through. This was priceless information for the patients' family. The ICU physician had deliberately worked to connect with the patients' family and allow them to regain some connectivity with their loved one. Through similar writing, the author triggers our own empathy and cultivates our compassion.

Through carefully balanced chapters, the author develops the narratives, psychologic pedagogy, and Aristotelian wisdom to provide proof for his premise. We learn that once we train ourselves to be self-aware that we can proceed to be truly present for our patients, colleagues, family members, and even strangers met on the street.

Being mindful requires thoughtfulness and effort. Epstein acknowledges that practice is essential. We learn that stress itself does not necessarily connote burnout. He adeptly points out that those in professions that experience ongoing stress or crises (like physicians) fare better when they are prepared to be unprepared. This is resilience. In the author's words, "resilience does not mean hardening of the heart, it is about adopting lightness, a sense of humor and flexibility". Others may understand resilience to be like the reed in the typhoon, it sways and bends, nearly flat to the earth, but after the strong winds pass, it recovers, slowly straightening again. Clinicians that are rigid, like an oak in that same storm, are more apt to break from the stressors of produc-

tivity, documentation, or adverse patient outcomes.

Epstein shows us the path that leads away from despair and dissatisfaction; each of us has the ability to right our journey toward a more positive end. He makes it clear that our work is a large part of our life and our search for work-life balance negates the tremendous importance and honor of what we do. The author describes how we can find meaning in our professional lives by connecting with those around us. As physicians, we can train ourselves to be more engaged with patients and colleagues; as educators, we can train ourselves to deepen our engagement with our learners. There is no need for balance if there is meaning in *all* aspects of our lives. In the book's last chapter, Epstein even provides the foundation for health systems to become mindful and instills hope for practitioners and the new physicians who will one day take our place and be our healers.⁵

The author richly references each chapter and adds extensive notes to his content, enticing readers to deepen their experience by reading more about select topics outside of the main text, easily found in his notes section. This attention to detail makes this addition an essential resource for anyone interested in the practice of mindfulness. Although the text is not intended to teach one how to meditate, a brief appendix provides some tips for beginners. While impossible to adequately summarize Epstein's instructions in *Attending*, I suggest considering the "ABCs of *Mindful Practice*":

A-Assess your level of presence; B-Be open to the unexpected; C-remain Curious.

In this age of digital conversations, higher rates of physician dissatisfaction and burnout, *Attending: Medicine, Mindfulness, and Humanity* by Ronald Epstein provides an unwavering argument that by making attending a way of life we can become mindful and heal ourselves. While one can quickly read this book in a weekend, I would urge you to read it in the manner Dr. Epstein would want you to—slowly and attentively.

References

1. Epstein R. *Attending: Medicine, Mindfulness, and Humanity*. New York: Scribner; 2017.
2. Epstein RM. Mindful practice. *JAMA*. 1999;282(9):833-839. doi: jsc90157 [pii].
3. Coulehan JL, Platt FW, Egener B, et al. "Let me see if i have this right...": Words that help build empathy. *Ann Intern Med*. 2001;135(3):221-227. doi: 200108070-00022 [pii].
4. West CP, Dyrbye LN, Erwin PJ, et al. Interventions to prevent and reduce physician burnout: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Lancet*. 2016;388(10057):2272-2281. doi: S0140-6736(16)31279-X [pii].
5. Ludmerer KM. Four fundamental educational principles. *J Grad Med Educ*. 2017;9(1):14-17. doi: 10.4300/JGME-D-16-00578.1 [doi].