



EPISODE 168 Tired of failing to make changes that matter to you? Start with this simple yet powerful exercise

With host Dr. Heather Fork

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HF: “Because she does like to be helpful, she takes on projects and she volunteers to be on committees, and she often has trouble delegating. She's getting phone calls and texts from the emergency room. Even during surgery, she's interrupted a lot. I asked her, what would her big C commitment be? She said, I commit to having healthier boundaries in my professional and personal life.”

Welcome to The Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. If you're questioning your career in medicine, you've come to the right place. I'm Heather Fork, a former dermatologist and founder of The Doctor's Crossing. As a master certified coach, I've helped hundreds of physicians find greater happiness in their career, whether in medicine, a nonclinical job, or something else. I started this podcast to help you discover the career path that's best for you and give you some resources and encouragement to make it happen. You don't need to get stuck at the white coat crossroads. So, pull up a chair, my friend, and let's carpe that diem.

Hi there and welcome back to the Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. I'm your host Heather Fork, and you're listening to episode number 168. In last week's episode, I talked about how often in the New Year by this time, about a month into the year, we've already fallen down on our resolutions and commitments. This often happens because

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we expect way too much of ourselves, can't keep up with our goals, and it's easier to just quit than face repeated disappointment.

In that episode, I offer an approach to try for better success, which is to under commit, but keep your commitment. I gave a number of examples of how to implement this strategy such as instead of making a commitment to go to the gym five days a week and do a killer workout, you start with doing some moderate exercise twice a week, and that could even be for 10 minutes, and once you're doing that consistently, you can increase your commitment.

I'm continuing on today with this theme of commitment to share another way to help ensure success with your goals and aspirations for this year. I want 2024 to be the best ever year for you.

I'm going to walk you through this exercise that I call the Big C - Little C commitment exercise. It's something I made up in use for myself and with my clients. I have three examples from physician clients of mine who gave their permission for me to discuss their commitments on the podcast. And I love what people always say when I ask them if they mind if I share their example. They'll say, "Well, if it helps one other person, yes, please do." Hopefully this will be really helpful for you.

And if you like this commitment exercise, after you hear about it, I have a free download template that walks you through this exercise that you can use for your own commitments. You'll be able to grab this at www.doctorscrossing.com/commitment. And I'll also put the link in the show notes.

Before you run and grab that freebie, let's dive into the examples. The first one I want to share is from an early career physician. She's recently out of residency, and in one of those highly sought after specialties where there's a great income prestige, really good lifestyle, yet, in spite of all this, she's questioning her career path. She's not sure she

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wants to practice clinically, and if she does, she wants to do it in a non-traditional way, but she's not really sure exactly what that would look like. She's also considering nonclinical options.

I thought we would use the Big C Little C exercise to get started. Now, in this exercise, your big C is a big commitment that you make to something that you want to have or do differently, want to achieve. It's a declaration, it's a strong statement.

When I asked her what her big C commitment would be, she said, "Well, I hope that I'm not going to end up being stuck in this job." She's starting a job and she's already feeling that it's going to be probably a 5 out of a 10 in terms of satisfaction, so she's not very excited about it. I said, "Okay, we need to work with this big C commitment because it needs to have more strength behind it, more of an assertion and a declaration than a wish or a weak hope."

She thought about it for a minute and she came back with "My big C commitment is I am making a do or die commitment to not get stuck in this job." Because her fear was that if she just started this job and momentum in life would just take over, because of inertia, she wouldn't actually do anything different. She would just collect the paycheck, keep going, and nothing really would change.

It's also helpful to have a time parameter on your commitments and she decided that by one year she would make sure that if she was not really happy in this job, she had a plan to do something different.

The next part of this exercise is to come up with your little Cs. These are little commitments or little steps that you do to support your big C commitment. Her first little C step was, "I will make time every week to work on the coaching homework and the career process." And again, here, it's good to go ahead and quantify that amount of time and, using this approach from last week's episode, under commit but keep your



commitment, you could say, “I’m going to spend 20 minutes on my career process.” And once you’re spending 20 minutes effectively a week, you bump it up to 30.

Her next little C commitment was, “I am going to journal so I can tune into my feelings.” She said, “When I get in the grind of work and life, I can become emotionally separated and distant from myself.” In other words, she was noticing that there’s this tendency when she just gets busy to really not pay attention to how she’s feeling, and she was going to use journaling as a way to stay more connected with what was really true for her.

Her third little C commitment is to start looking around for opportunities to volunteer for refugee populations. She’s done this type of volunteering in the past, it’s important to her, it connects her with her values, brings her energy, and even though this isn’t necessarily going to lead to a new career direction, I think this is really important to do regardless if it’s something that matters to you. It can wake up your heart, you can start to see things differently and you never know how in some way doing something like this that’s so meaningful to you can help shape your career direction.

Her fourth little C commitment was to write an article for KevinMD about a profound and moving patient experience she had. She chose this because she really loves to write. People have told her that her writing is very good.

When someone tells me that, that they’re interested in seeing if maybe writing could be a potential career path, I encourage them to go ahead and write something and submit it. If you’re not familiar with KevinMD, he publishes a lot of articles written by physicians and other individuals. And when you do this, you really find out, “Okay, how much do I really like to write?” And you see what are the topics that are important to me to write on?

If you think about your own situation, what is a big C commitment that you have for this year? I'm curious. And you can also think about what would be a first little C to get started with. You don't have to have three or four. You can even just start with one, and that might be just all that you need.

The second part of this exercise is actually one of the most important parts, and it is to ask yourself this question, "What is most likely to interfere with keeping my commitment?" When I asked the client, what is most likely to interfere with her keeping this commitment to making sure she doesn't get stuck in this job and prioritizing her career satisfaction, she said, "I tend to put off what is important to me and prioritize my commitment to other people. I lose myself. I have a family, a partner, I have friends. I can put things on hold."

I wanted to dig a little deeper, so I said, "Can you give me an example of when this happened?" She went on to describe how there is a family member that is having a lot of challenges and is rather unstable, and I'm not going to go in any of the details here, but it turns out that when there's a crisis with this family member, she feels like she needs to drop everything and respond to a phone call or email or to actually go and do something. She said, "I can use family issues as an excuse to not address my own career situation." She went on to say, "If I don't attend to their needs in these moments, I feel guilty, and if I do, I still feel guilty for neglecting my own needs and priorities."

We went on to use this Big C Little C exercise again, and she made the big C commitment to have better boundaries and relationships, and then we came up with a number of little C steps to help her do that.

I'm really glad that we did the second part of the exercise because it's very likely that this pattern of not prioritizing her own career situation was going to take over, and then she would also have those feelings of disappointment, and yet again, not honoring what she needed to do for herself.

This next example I want to share has to do with a physician who wanted to have better boundaries. So, let's dive in. This physician happens to be a surgeon and she's a type two on the Enneagram. The type two is known as the helper type. Type twos love to help people as the name describes, but as we talk about on the Enneagram, the gift of each type when it is overdone, becomes its liability. Twos can find themselves saying "yes" too often, getting involved in too many projects or tasks, taking extra calls, doing things that they'd really rather say "no" to, but they don't want to disappoint people.

In speaking with this surgeon, she described the constant interruptions that happen when she's in clinic trying to see patients. She's getting phone calls and texts from the emergency room. Even during surgery, she's interrupted a lot. Because she does like to be helpful, she takes on projects and she volunteers to be on committees, and she often has trouble delegating.

As we talked about her situation, I asked her what would her big C commitment be. She said, "I commit to having healthier boundaries in my professional and personal life." Next, we went on to list some little C commitments that she could get started with. The first little C commitment that she came up with is to press a pause button before saying "yes." This is a figurative pause button. I think it's a really great technique for a lot of situations where you just need a little bit of time. You could think of it as a button in front of you and you press it instead of pressing green right away and saying "yes" automatically, you press it and it turns yellow and you give some time to decide is this going to be a green "yes" or is it a red "no?" She said, "I want to be able to choose if this is something I really want to do, and if it's how I want to respond."

She got more specific with some additional little Cs. Her next little C is "I am going to be less available on my phone. I'm going to start screening my messages, and I'm not going to have my phone in clinic with me when I'm seeing patients if I'm not on call." She also added, "And if I'm in the OR, I'm going to ask a nurse to take a message."

She described how when she was doing cases sometimes, the ER would call, they wanted to talk about a patient and it was always interrupting her and it felt like she wasn't able to optimally focus on the patient, and yet she felt like, "Well, I really need to respond to the doctor calling from the emergency department." She's going to give herself more of a chance to assess, "Is this something I really need to do right now?"

Her third little C is "I am not going to apologize for taking the time I need to respond." She described how sometimes she would be even in the restroom and the emergency department would call, and if she didn't get back to them within two minutes they'd be texting her. And she just has gotten in this pattern where she feels like she just needs to immediately respond all the time and then apologize if there's some kind of "delay."

Her fourth little C is to be better about delegating to nurses and other staff members. For her coaching homework, this surgeon took on these little C commitments as exercises to try out in her day-to-day work, and I just met with her this week actually to see how things were going, and she was doing really well at implementing all of these actually. She said it's a work in progress, but she's finding ways when she's in clinic or in the OR or someone asks her to do a project or present something at a meeting, to press the pause button and decide, "Do I need to respond to this right away? How do I want to respond? And really what's important here?" She's already making great inroads.

Interestingly, in this third and final example I'm going to share, the physician came up with an identical little C commitment to the surgeon, but for a completely different situation. This physician is mid-career and in a specialty where it's not uncommon for acute situations to arise with patients. He described to me about how he can be trying to manage an acute patient and someone comes to him and interrupts him with a non-urgent matter, and he's already feeling anxious about his patient and the interruption annoys him and he gets hotheaded. He may raise his voice at the person. He says, getting angry in the moment can work temporarily. It makes the person go



away, but afterwards he regrets handling things this way and wishes that he could maintain his calm and not get so reactive.

This physician is also a type two, the helper type on the Enneagram, and he has a fairly high type eight, which is known as the challenger or the leader. The type eight is a more assertive type. They are frequently seen as surgeons or surgical subspecialists, and they can get very passionate, which can also be a code word for angry sometimes when they feel that their ability to take care of a patient is being interfered with.

I asked this physician what he wanted his big C commitment to be, and he said, "I commit to being less reactive in the moment and choose how I respond when I'm under stress." His first little C commitment is to press the pause button in the moment and count to 10 and take some deep breaths when he is starting to feel aggravated.

I didn't prompt him to say that or say that this is what other clients of mine use. He just came up with that. Again, I think it's a great technique to just give us a chance to come out of reactivity and have more choice, which is really freedom to decide how we want to respond.

His second little C is to have constructive self-talk. He said, "I need to remind myself of how when I look back on these types of situations, I'm actually able to handle them okay, and I don't need to get so stressed."

And he also described what was really underneath the reactivity was fear. There was this fear that he was not going to be able to manage the patient correctly. A bit of the self-doubt coming in. And it's really true that fear can masquerade as anger with other people. It's a projection. He already had the self-awareness to understand that he needed to work on his own self-confidence to be able to work on this issue.

His third little C is to start to incorporate meditation and mindfulness practices and use some of the apps that he has. I love this idea because meditation, mindfulness are really great mind training techniques, and the goal is really to allow us to be an observer of our thoughts and the feelings that come up and choose our response instead of be reactive. And that's a lifelong practice, but this is definitely something that will help him with the situation that he's talking about where he just gets reactive and he is not able to choose his response.

His fourth little C is to do some journaling to better understand the feelings that are coming up. I love this. Again, this is similar to the first physician that we talked about. Writing is an excellent way to understand more of what is going on in our subconscious mind. We can think about a problem, but that really only gets us to surface level depth. When you're writing, you connect more to the subconscious mind and ideas and perspectives and connections are possible that you don't see when you're just ruminating on a problem.

It's very important, as I mentioned before, to go on and do the second part of this exercise, which is to ask yourself, "What is most likely to interfere with keeping my commitment?" When I asked this physician this question, he said, "Well, when I'm starting to get irritated, angry inside and have some awareness that my temperature is rising and I should get a grip on myself, this voice comes in my head that says, yeah, but this situation is different than all those others. This situation calls for a strong reaction." He went on to say, "Of course, after the fact, it turns out that the situation was essentially just the same as all the others, and I really didn't need to lose my temper."

I'm really excited for these three physicians. I think they have this combination of what they really need to be able to make powerful change and keep their commitments, and that's this ability to be self-aware, to look at themselves from the outside in, to come up with strategies that they can do on a daily basis that really help them and also are willing to admit "What's underneath the surface? Is there fear? Fear of not knowing what to do



with a patient, fear of disappointing other people such as my family, fear of disappointing people if I don't say yes to them all the time?"

When we're able to have this type of self-awareness and observation, we're not on autopilot. We're not just going through life being affected by other people and circumstances and situations. We really have the power to choose how we want to be and show up for ourselves and others. I also want to thank these physicians for letting me share their examples. It's always very helpful.

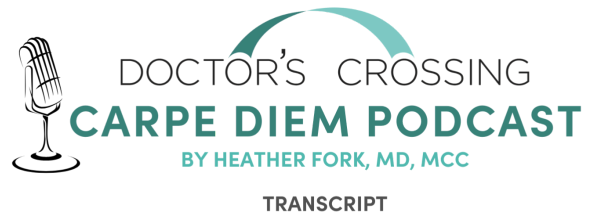
Before I wrap up, just let me review these steps quickly for the exercise. First, you'll write down your big C commitment. Then secondly, come up with several little C commitments that can help you move towards implementing your bigger goal, and then remember to ask this key question, "What is most likely to interfere with keeping this commitment?" And then devise a strategy to work with that.

To help you get started, as I mentioned, you can download the freebie that walks you through this exercise. It'll be at www.doctorscrossing.com/commitment. And I'll also have a link for it in the show notes.

I want to thank you so much my dear listeners for being here. I would not and could not do this without you. Please feel free to share your big C commitments with me or this exercise that you're going to be filling out. I'd love to cheer you on and hold this intention for you. And as always, don't forget to carpe that diem and I'll see you in the next episode. Bye for now.

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