Almost no one is comfortable in settings of loss. We respect those who own the most and avoid loss at all costs. We punish children by taking things away from them and insult people by calling them “losers.” In such a culture, loss is an embarrassment and a failure, something to be hidden. But few of us know how to grieve and heal from loss.

Medical students are a product of this culture, as are the doctors who train them. When we enter our profession we inherit the expectation that we will be able to prevent loss, to fix and restore what is now a part of the past. But often loss cannot be fixed. Unsurprisingly, many people distance themselves from others at times of loss. Our avoidance of loss and feelings of failure are possibly the most common reasons our patients feel abandoned and uncared for.

The Healer’s Art is an elective course for preclinical medical students that enables them to explore how to become the doctors their patients would like them to be. This 15-hour course was first developed and taught by Rachel Naomi Remen, MD, in 1992. In 1999, the Institute for the Study of Health and Illness (ISHI) began training faculty to disseminate the course nationwide, and currently 53 medical schools offer The Healer’s Art in the United States, Canada, Israel, and Slovenia.

The course focuses on the inner life of physicians and students and helps establish a mutual community of inquiry into some of the most basic experiences and values of physicians. The course’s educational strategy is based on a discovery model and draws on tested approaches and theories from fields such as humanistic psychology, formational theory, contemplative practice, imagery, and cognitive and Jungian psychology. Approximately 40% of the curriculum is focused on an exploration of the personal experience of loss and healing from loss.

Medical students and faculty are encouraged to reflect on their own disappointments and losses, share their own stories, and uncover deeper learnings from these experiences in a setting of mutual safety. While gathered in small groups, participants discover that loss can be a doorway into many of the core experiences that define medicine. The personal discovery of compassion, awe, mystery, calling, and commitment to service are shared openly, building a powerful community of shared intent and experience between students and faculty.

Students and faculty are asked first to reflect on a time of disappointment and loss in their own lives and respond to the question “What did others do and say that was helpful to you at this time of loss?” They are then asked to consider the question “What did others do and say that was not helpful to you at this time of loss?” Responses are consolidated into two lists that serve as validation for helpful approaches. Table 1 lists some of the most common responses.

Students often discover that their personal instincts about how to respond to loss are confirmed by the entire group and therefore come to trust their instincts. Students also frequently comment that in their own experience the strategies they have seen physicians use are counterproductive.

Students are then helped to reflect on a time of disappointment and loss in their own lives, after which they break into small groups and share their experiences of loss during two sessions. They are encouraged to “listen generously” to one another, without liking or disliking, agreeing or disagreeing, but just knowing and respecting what is true for another person. By observing the effect their presence and “generous listening” has on others and by personally experiencing the effect of being listened to by others, students relinquish the need to “fix” loss and recognize how grieving loss can heal. Students experience firsthand the personal power they have to make a difference for someone who is in pain over a loss that is irretrievable. One student commented, “I used to think listening was unhelpful.
lame, what you did when you did not know the answer. But I
discovered that I can heal with my listening things that I cannot
cure with my science.”

Please contact ISHI at ishi@commonweal.org if you are
interested in learning more about implementing The Healer’s
Art at your institution. The Healer’s Art is grant supported and
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References
2 Remen NR, Rabow MW. The Healer’s Art: Professionalism, Service and Mission.
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Rachel N. Remen, MD, is founder and director of the Institute for the Study of Health and
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ician and a board-certified member of AHA/PM. Dr. Rabow is a faculty scholar in the Soros
Project on Death in America and serves as the director of the Center for the Study of
the Healers Art at ISHI. Dr. Rabow has served on the faculty of the UCSF Healer’s Art
course for 8 years.

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