

A message of hope to the struggling speech-language pathologist

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A message of hope to the struggling SLP

Are you a struggling speech-language pathologist? Feeling over-whelmed or burned out? If so, you're not alone!

I wrote the first draft of this post in my journal this week, feeling overwhelmed and powerless at the problems our field is facing and my own struggles. I felt better by the end of it (journaling often has this effect on me).

If you're a struggling speech-language pathologist (SLP), I hope it helps you too.

Being an SLP is hard

It's hard to work alone without the support of other SLPs.

It's dispiriting to work in an area where some SLPs seem happy to operate on the basis of decades-old knowledge, skills, and materials.

It's overwhelming to realize that you don't know everything there is to know about your field, and you never will because there is just so much and it increases every day.

It feels terrible when you can't dedicate enough waking hours to learning more in the hopes of finding that one new idea that could "cure" the patient sitting in front of you.

It's hard to feel confident when your field keeps advancing but your employer can't afford to provide you with discipline-specific continuing education opportunities or up-to-date assessment and therapy tools.

It's confusing when your field seems full of conflicting information and opinions and precious little evidence.

It's dismaying when the patient in front of you doesn't fit the profile of any relevant research study you've found, but you still have to figure out how to help them.

It's daunting when CMS and your employer asks more and more of you while taking little off your plate.

It's soul-crushing to expect so much of yourself and be discouraged by the gaps in your knowledge, skills, and resources.

Being an SLP is hard, but then again, you're doing a hard thing.

People are not widgets

If you wanted easy, you'd be stacking widgets on shelves for a living.

It would be one thing if science, medicine, and psychology had people all figured out. And all you had to do was seek out the answers.

But no one has all the answers.

As a field, we're still learning what "normal" is, let alone how it goes wrong and how to fix it.

Therapy isn't math, where you can input the variables and hit the "compute" button and have your answers displayed on the screen.

Experimental science? Theory-informed art?

What you do is experimental science; every patient a mini-experiment. Or theory-informed art. Or some mixture.

The person you're working with, your patient, is a messy human being, with lots of variables and idiosyncratic characteristics. Someone with a lifetime of experiences who's damaged or broken in some way. Changed in a way that interferes with living life the way they want.

And you have your own messy knowledge and skills. Gaps of known things you haven't learned yet. Gaps of unknown things that no one yet knows. You have the skills and tools you need and the resources to find answers. Or you don't.

You have your own stresses, your own variables and idiosyncratic characteristics. Your own messy life.

And somehow, in that chaotic blend of half-known knowledge and skill, the lack of ideal resources, and the messy human variables, you achieve great things.

You change the lives of the people you work with

Because of you, someone can talk clearly.

Because of you, someone can express their innermost thoughts.

Because of you, someone can enjoy meals with their friends and family.

Because of you, someone can remember the information that's important to them.

Because of you, someone can remain safely in the home they've spent their entire adult life in.

Because of you, someone has successfully recreated their identity after life-changing loss.

Because of you, someone has accepted inevitable change and maximized their potential.

Because of you, someone felt understood and comforted.

And the benefit isn't uni-directional.

The people you work with change your life

You are touched when the people you work with care about you in return.

You are inspired by the courage you see in people facing disappointment and adversity.

You learn to appreciate the many ways that families express love, respect, and support.

You realize that appearances can be deceiving. People are often dealing with far more loss and hurt and tragedy than you realize.

You feel blessed to work in a career that you love, knowing that you often make a real difference to people.

You take heart knowing that you're "paying it forward". Someday, you or a loved one will need assistance. With any luck, they'll work with someone as dedicated and caring as you.

Because even though you're not perfect and all-knowing, you're doing the best you can. You're making an honest effort to keep your skills fresh.

Focus on the gain, not on the gap

"Focus on the gain, not the gap." (I heard [Michael Hyatt talk about this](#) with Ruth Soukup in the Do It Scared podcast.)

You know how overwhelming it is to focus on the gap, on any area where you're falling short.

And honestly, you know that the gap for many in our field is pretty big.

Since our knowledge base grows larger every day, it's a losing proposition to aim to master everything.

Instead, focus on the gain.

Celebrate the fact that you know more today compared to a year ago.

Plan to learn one new thing a month. Maybe take advantage of ASHA's Perspectives of the SIGs.

Or plan to learn one new thing a week. Listen to a podcast related to our field.

And when you learn something new, something you think you may use, write it down. Plan to try it out.

Tell a fellow clinician about it. Teaching is a great way to learn.

It's why I'm writing this blog. I'm learning as I write. I'm trying to expand my practice one new idea at a time. And I want to share what I'm learning with you.

Because you're an amazing SLP, and you deserve to own your skills and confidently learn and apply new knowledge like the professional you are.

I hope my blog inspires you to try out one new idea in your practice!

Suggested reading

- I wrote about five key changes I made to improve work-life balance after almost burning out in home health.
- Learn how organizing your work bag and your planner can save you time.
- Read seven tips to minimize your workload while still providing great care.

Featured image by [Ben White](#) on [Unsplash](#).