Wellness Column: Learning to *Let It Go*

By Wendy Woolley, MD

After a stressful morning, a physician colleague receives a note from her 4 year old that read: **"MOMYOUFORGOTTOGIVEMEAKISSTODAY"** in classic large space-less toddler scrawl. She shared it knowing that other physician mommies can relate.

We've all been there. The heartbreak that is a part of life as a physician mommy takes many forms. Whether a pout, a stare, a cry, a comment, a scowl or a note, no one can give the knife of mommy guilt the same twist as our own children do. When they do, just remember that you are not alone. Data from the Pew Research Center on social trends show that more than half (56%) of working parents report difficulty with the balance between their family and work obligations. More women (60%) than men (52%) reported difficulty and those reports were also higher for women with college or post-graduate degree (70%) than those women without a college degree (52%). It's no wonder that physician mothers share this struggle.



My tale of mommy guilt began with my first pregnancy. In January of 2008 we suffered from a missed AB and lost our twins. I was a first year attending and working hard. Although my OB reassured me that it wasn't my fault, I couldn't help but wonder if the time on my feet and the caffeine had anything to do with it. Over the next several years, we were blessed with 4 more pregnancies but they were far from easy. My anxiety that something would go wrong was extreme and they took a significant physical toll on my body. I would contract regularly from ~20 weeks until delivery which prompted my OB to put limitations on my work. Like most physicians, I was a terrible patient and eventually my version of "modified" bed rest wound up causing me additional complications.

Throughout it all, I often felt like I was being judged and that my complicated pregnancies reflected poorly on me as a woman, a mother and a physician. I felt like I should be able to do it all and when I couldn't, I felt like a failure. I didn't understand how or why so many beautiful pregnant women around me could work every shift until the day they delivered without any obvious problems. I tried to compensate by being overly productive with administrative tasks but it was at a cost to my family since I couldn't wear my "brave face" 24/7 and they received the brunt of my fear, anxiety, exhaustion and pain. My oldest daughter once said to me that she never wants to have children "because being pregnant means being sick and mean all the time". That truly twisted the mommy guilt knife!

During the very stressful last 2 weeks of my final pregnancy, I had a lot of time to think and reflect on the roller coaster of emotions that I had been on over the past 7 years. I started to realize how much I was focused on others...what others thought, what others were doing, what others expected. Somewhere around this time the Frozen sensation also swept the nation. With young daughters, I couldn't help but hear a repeated chorus of "Let It Go". Eventually I began

to apply that mantra to my mommy guilt and it has started to work.

I had multiple soul-searching sessions with my husband, my therapist and my pastor. I realized that I needed to reset my priorities. I decided to change my job. I stepped back from my administrative responsibilities and took a position that is purely clinical. We moved to where the cost of living is less which allows the option of part time work while still paying all of the bills (I am the sole income for our family of 6). I work 100% night shifts to allow for scheduling preference and better capability of having some routine for my family. It is what works for us right now. I've learned that I want to work and that's OK. But I want to work at a job that respects the fact that my family comes first and that's OK too. Each day that I go to work, I'm missing something at home. Some days that makes me sad because the girls are being so sweet but some days I leave early for my shift because they are driving me insane by being kids. The days when I'm with my family, there are professional opportunities that I miss. I've found that other opportunities will take their place. FemInEM.org is a perfect example of one of these opportunities. I am focusing my work time on what I want to be doing and aligning those goals with what needs to be done. Some days everyone is happy and everything goes exactly according to the schedule - those are few and far between but they do happen. Then there are days when it all falls apart. That's when I have to remind myself to let it go. For me, the important thing is at the end of all of these days, I am a successful Emergency Physician and a good mom to four beautiful daughters. I have nothing to feel guilty about.

Letting go of the guilt is not easy. The details of your guilty tale will vary from mine but I'm fairly certain that every one of us has our own guilt story. I shared mine here so you can know that you are not alone and that you can find some way to let it go. We will all make different choices at different times in our lives and careers. Remember to make those choices within the frame of your own goals and priorities and you can let it go with your head held high. When all else fails, put Elsa on your playlist on repeat...when you hear the message often enough, it becomes much harder not to listen.