

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dr. Wolff is a board-certified family physician in private practice in Cornelius, North Carolina. He finished his family practice residency in 1997. He has graciously consented to share stories from the trenches of primary care. While his practice diary is taken from actual patient encounters, the reader should be aware that some medication references may represent off-label uses. Identifying details have been changed to protect patient confidentiality.

We at the *Companion* are certain that these vignettes will inform, entertain, challenge, and stimulate our readers in their effort to address behavioral issues in the everyday practice of medicine.

Tennis Anyone?

Christian G. Wolff, M.D.

Monday

HR is a 40-year-old woman in for follow-up, accompanied by her husband. What began 6 weeks ago as a visit for belly pain ended with disclosure of a significant marital stressor—she was a worrywart. Despite seeing various counselors, she obsessively worried. A mild response after 3 weeks led me to increase her dose of fluoxetine to 40 mg, and today, she comes in beaming. The look on her husband's face told the rest of the story. After clarifying that she was no longer hypomanic, I refilled her medication and wished them a Merry Christmas.

Tuesday

Today brought mixed news from GR, an 80-year-old woman being treated for ovarian cancer. "Dr. H said I'm cancer free! So why can't I stop crying?" she asked. Under the stress of chemotherapy, this kind woman had noted significant worsening of tearfulness, lack of interest in daily activities, decreased appetite, and suicidal thoughts over the last 4 months. It's amazing how one fight can be won only to have another battle flare up. I started her on mirtazapine; hopefully, she will improve over the holidays.

Wednesday

Speaking of cancer, we got tough news at the office today. One of the very nice ladies who serviced our office as a pharmaceutical representative succumbed to breast cancer over the weekend. She was 32.

Thursday

RD is a remarkably personable 35-year-old corporate executive who called in saying "I can't sleep because of racing thoughts." I worked him in over lunch.

I've been seeing RD and his family for many years; they are some of my favorite patients. RD and his wife divorced 3 years ago, and both have since remarried. He's a committed dad, but at times seemed overly charismatic and high energy—you might even say grandiose. Yes, my first impulse was that he may be having a manic event.

I think I was wrong. As hard as I tried to elicit a story even suggesting hypomania from him by scouring his family history and leading him with my questions, all I could come up with was an acute situational disturbance due to 4 acute stressors all occurring at once. I liken his condition to a tennis player practicing with a ball machine. If the machine sends you 1 ball, you can swat it away. Two balls require more skill, but can be done. Three balls become unmanageable, and soon you're all curled up on the ground while balls are flung from every direction.

I think he's just being pelted with too many tennis balls. I outfitted him with some ezopiclone and as-needed clonazepam, as well as my favorite counselor.

Friday

KB is a new patient who wants me to sign a form allowing her to substitute teach. I asked who has been caring for her and prescribing her medications (which are extensive) until now. She replied that it was her psychiatrist, whom she didn't like because he wouldn't sign the form.

Hmm. Now why should I be inclined to provide this clearance after one 10-minute meeting?

I later called her psychiatrist, who was not surprised. His response? "She may be crazy, but at least she's honest." ♦