

Re-Entry: The last task of a Balint Intensive (or “How to say ‘Good-bye’ to the Balint State of Mind”)

I really didn't understand what was happening at the time of our residency faculty meeting, but I did realize I was somewhat uninvolved, somewhat disconnected and very uncharacteristically quiet. Anyone who knows me would begin to wonder. What I did become aware of was that the timing of this meeting was not inconsequential – it was held 24 hours after the end of a Balint Leaders Intensive. When that realization hit me, it became clear that I was experiencing a struggle to re-enter my life. What was surprising to me was the fact that this was my third Balint Leader ‘Intensive’, and I had not experienced anything quite like this after my first two Intensive experiences. In fact, if anything, after my previous two Intensives, I was excited, energized and ready to apply my newly learned skills. I was like a child with a new toy. My parents just explained and demonstrated how it works. This time was different. I do recall that ‘re-entry’ was mentioned at the last large group meeting where we all shared in the marvel that these meetings are. But I don't remember anyone really describing the sense of culture shock, the time warp or silent sonic boom that can accompany the contrast between the serenity and intimacy of our Balint groups on the one hand and the hustle and bustle of ‘real life’ on the other hand.

The fact that I didn't experience this in my first two Intensive experiences is part of what made me somewhat surprised this time. Upon reflection, I have some ideas why this was the case. I am certain that I was previously less emotionally available. Part of my limits at previous Intensives had to do with disruptive things going on in my personal life, and I think that an additional part of it related to my extreme focus on the process (so I could learn to do it right). I was watching what was happening while trying to be part of it. What was different this time? I believe that I was more personally and emotionally available. In addition, I felt like I knew the basics about leading a Balint group; I felt more free to just experience it – to be more fully ‘here and now’, either as a group member or practicing leadership skills. Clearly, the more ‘here and now’ one is, the more ‘present’ one can be with his/her group. I am aware that I am not only trusting the Balint process, but I am also trusting the process of the Intensive as a learning and training experience. I can be fully ‘here and now’ during the groups and learn about what happened (‘there and then’) during the processing time.

I wonder also about the others who attended the same Intensive or any other Intensive where the emotional tone develops a similar sense of intimacy. “Re-entry” – the word itself conjures up images of the space shuttle with its narrow window for re-entry, or possibly any special place or event that you pay to attend, and once you leave, you are warned “No Re-entry.” Like all these examples, *we have gone to a different place* – at least figuratively; however, it happened without our noticing or choosing to do so until we were there. It's like a hypnotic trance – we go deeper and deeper, slowly – as our group evolves, becoming more trusting, more open, with more sharing and caring. We have clearly reached a level of trust and intimacy that allows us to fully consider the nature of our connections with our patients. We face, with a clarity not usually possible,

the ways our work has meaning and value to us and to our patients. It seems like a luxury to have this time to dig deep emotionally – yet it is probably a necessity to do this occasionally over the long haul in order that we keep ourselves centered in our profession.

Would a warning label be appropriate? “You are leaving Balintville – Proceed with Caution.” We have subtly dropped our defenses, and we have done work that is often intensely meaningful to all of us. We’re not numb like when we get anesthesia – we don’t need someone to drive us home. However, all joking aside, we have been immersed in a process to seek deeper understanding and meaning of our complex work experiences. When we do return to our homes and work, it is very likely helpful if we do have a co-participant to accompany us.

In contrast to the Balint Intensive experience, the reality is that, of necessity, much of our lives are transacted at a more mundane level, and we have been freed of those responsibilities for a short time. I wonder if we might be helped to more pointedly identify the possibility of experiencing some re-entry symptoms. It’s a complex process – the shift from one work environment to another. It is probably a very individualistic experience. But it might be helpful to explore with the large group at the closing meeting if anyone has had other times they have experienced a re-entry adjustment (I know I can think of a couple others for myself). It is easier to negotiate when it is predicted and/or expected. It is normalized – and, it is just as normal if it doesn’t happen.

As a member of one of our groups said at the end: Metaphors be with you!

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Jeffrey L. Sternlieb, Ph.D.
Family Systems Associate
Lehigh Valley Hospital Family Practice Residency Program
1730 Chew Street
Allentown, PA 18104
610-969-2560
Jeffrey.Sternlieb@lvh.com