

Episode: *Author Interview: “A Completely Normal Conversation With a Box”*

Guest: Beck Regan

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[bright theme music]

TIM HOFF (HOST): Welcome to another episode of the Author Interview series from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*. I'm your host, Tim Hoff. This series provides an alternative way to access the interesting and important work being done by Journal contributors each month. Joining me on this episode is Beck Regan, a second-year medical student at the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine in Richmond. They're here to discuss their comic, *Resiliency: A Completely Normal Conversation Between a Box and a Medical Student*, in the May 2023 issue of the Journal, [Interprofessional Education and Innovation](#). Beck, thank you so much for being on the podcast today.

BECK REGAN: Oh, thank you so much for inviting me, Tim! My goodness. [music fades]

HOFF: So, to begin with, what's the main ethics point of your comic?

REGAN: Yeah. Well, originally, I based this on the kind of the health care meme of wellness modules. While I doubt this is health care specific, there's kind of a joke surrounding these mandatory training modules, which are typically completed in professionals' off time, that focus on like self-care and mindfulness. Of course, don't get me wrong, focusing on self-care and mindfulness is fantastic. But there's kind of this hint of dramatic irony when you have health professionals and health professional students who are facing incredible amounts of burnout from largely systemic sources, but then they go and complete these modules in the precious little off time they have. So, you kind of wonder, like, what's the point of these modules then? It's a bit of a tragicomedy in that respect.

So, really, I wanted to create a comic about the inherent tension between genuinely valuing self-care and the role that these modules may have in obscuring the systemic root causes of burnout. I depict the well-meaning but kind of individual thinking medical student drinking that modular Kool-Aid, as it were, and really only seeing self-care as kind of an aftercare thing. There's no really root cause, nothing to be fixed because the issue is, as they see it, largely the individual's ability to be resilient. You're either resilient or you're not, and the main problem with burnt out people is that they're not resilient. So, it's this kind of idea that if you are burning out, you're just doing resiliency wrong.

In contrast, I have the box character, the other, and I wanted this comic to be abstract because otherwise it would be a rather boring *Dinner With Andre*, the comic kind of style. So, I wanted to represent what the modules don't tell you, the kind of dangerous and obscure concept of collective interprofessional action, which can address the main reasons anyone has to be resilient in the first place. I wanted this character, this box character, to be righteously angry and frustrated with the current paradigm, the catalyst for much needed change, but whose focus on group action kind of instills this bitterness for anything on the individual level. They've been kind of burnt on how self-care has been mutated into this cynical tool to kind of silence unrest, and thus they completely reject self-care entirely as a concept. It's understandable, but shortsighted.

Their synthesis then, towards the end, kind of leads to nuance and understanding that self-care is vital for collective action. But also, collective action is vital for self-care. It's a symbiotic relationship and one which challenges the current structures, which is why—[laughs] and I do realize it's a bit cheesy and a bit on the nose—but that's why at the very end I do have the very structure of the comic falling apart at the end.

HOFF: Sure, sure. And for listeners who are interested, you can see Beck's comic obviously at JournalOfEthics.org to see exactly how they handle that falling, that structural falling apart visually, which is pretty interesting.

So, for your fellow health professions students and trainees, what would you think the most important thing for them to take away from your comic is?

REGAN: Yeah, of course. More than anything else, really, and I genuinely mean this, despite how much mainstream culture idealizes this individual effort, kind of the heroism of the individual, I really think it's interprofessional solidarity is one of the strongest tools we have to enact institutional change. Many of the reasons professionals need to be resilient in the first place can be changed with group action. And of course, I'm not saying, like, it's very easy to say and another thing to implement, and I understand that this will require much more reaching out on everyone's part. And as a future physician—well, hopefully!—I'm certainly, I certainly do mean physicians well, if not especially given kind of the relative privileged status our society gives to physicians. And I think it's important that we reach out, and I think it's important to know what struggle your colleagues—and by colleagues I do mean nurses, PAs, food service workers, maintenance workers, pretty literally everybody in the hospital—are having, and how everyone can come together and make changes, both for the sake of the well-being of your colleagues and their struggles, but as well, this is overall also going to impact patient safety. So, I think becoming educated about the professions around yourself and genuinely trying to help outside of your own profession, I think that's the future. If we want these interprofessional relationships, we have to be the one to build them, and it takes work.

HOFF: And finally, if you could add a point to this piece that you didn't have the time or space to fully explore within the bounds of this particular comic, what would that be?

REGAN: Oh, yeah, of course. I think one of the things, one of the things I kind of kick myself for not including. But yeah, one of the things I wish I could've changed about the ending was kind of this focus on the individual. While I definitely briefly touch on the subject in the comic, I think I really would've wanted to rework the ending to have more of a togetherness feel. I really, I just really can't stress enough how much of a team sport our future really has to be, especially if we want things to change. [theme music returns] So, I think if I had to pick one thing, I would want the reader to come away with that feeling.

HOFF: Beck, thank you so much for your time on the podcast today and for your contribution to the Journal this month.

REGAN: Oh, thank you for having me.

HOFF: To read the full article as well as the rest of this month's issue for free, visit our site, JournalOfEthics.org. We'll be back soon with more *Ethics Talk* from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*.