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Something Has to Change

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BAS 495 Capstone Project

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Abstract

This project happened to be about the same time that I was diagnosed with chronic Lyme disease. Lyme disease is acquired when you are bitten by an infected tick. If not treated in the acute stages this person will continue to get sicker with a multitude of unexplained health issues. I am an unlucky individual that was bitten by a diseased tick, and I had no idea. It took a year before any of my doctors figured it out. I was faced with a major lifestyle decision once I was diagnosed with chronic Lyme. If I wanted to live symptom-free I had to change my entire lifestyle and my approach to medicine. My capstone project allowed me to solve this problem with a team of people doing it right along with me. I am lucky to have so many people in my life who love me and want me to get back to feeling normal. This project is how I used integrative thinking to solve my problem.

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Discovering the Problem

Something has to change. This is a personal problem that I feel comfortable sharing and being candid about. This is my story and a shared problem between myself and everyone close to me. I have been forced to make a decision and depending on the path I choose, the consequences and/or reward will be life-changing. I was recently diagnosed with chronic Lyme disease. After a year of unexplained illnesses, random and scary symptoms that sent me to the emergency room (i.e. headaches, tachycardia, syncope, severe fatigue, abnormal weight gain, joint pain and swelling to the point that walking was difficult, and sudden onset of anxiety.) an ER doctor took a chance and drew every blood test he could think of. The ER doctor told me, "I am going to test you for Lyme disease and a few other autoimmune diseases. Your symptoms are all over the place, nothing is getting better, and there has not been a single explanation as to why you went from healthy to this many ED visits in the last six months." My results came back from the CDC for Lyme disease. The next step was to start a treatment plan with my primary provider.

The Beginning

I quickly found out that here in Idaho Lyme disease is not carried by our ticks and is not a commonly treated illness. The only treatment my provider suggested was a month-long antibiotic. Well, I took it and felt like I was getting better while on antibiotics. As soon as I was off of them, within the week some of my symptoms were starting to come back. Other than another round of antibiotics (oral or IV) and a whole slew of other meds to manage the symptoms, my provider had no other answers or suggestions for me. I knew right then I was the only one that was going to find a treatment that did not include oral and/or IV medications.

Of course, just like anyone else, as soon as I got my diagnosis I immediately started reading about Lyme disease to educate myself on the long-term effects. I only agreed to one

round of antibiotics because I knew the consequences of taking those types of meds for too long would be detrimental to my health. So I turned to the internet and researched everything I could. I went deep into the rabbit hole sort of speak and found that I was not the only one that the Western medicine world had failed when it came to treating Lyme disease.

The Question

Well as fate would have it I was entering my capstone course for Boise State's BAS degree program and thought this was a great opportunity for me to find a solution with an integrative approach. The first step was to create two choices that were at opposite ends of the spectrum. "In integrative thinking, we start by seeking a simple articulation or framing of a problem that is worth solving. A problem worth solving is one that matters" (Reil & Martin, 2017, pg. 82). I framed my problem and created two opposing solutions. Either I ignore my chronic Lyme disease, continue to get sicker, suffer from increased fatigue, along with a whole slew of other side effects; or I tackle the new challenge of living with chronic Lyme disease, keep the symptoms to a minimum, and be more active with my family, friends, and work. I chose the latter.

The Solution

With the guidance and tools provided by Reil and Martin in their book *Creating Great Choices: A Leader's Guide to Integrative Thinking (2017)*, I was able to develop many models for my problem, create goals and develop a plan with my stakeholders, and start working hard towards our final solution. My stakeholders and I decided we were going to shoot for the stars and tackle the challenge of living a full, healthy, happy life without accepting the feat of a chronic illness.

The Stakeholders

With me as the primary leader, my stakeholders were my significant other, my children, immediate family members, my pets, friends, my co-workers, and my patients. We all value living our best lives, empathy, and connection. I knew with the support of my stakeholders, their opinions, advice, and shared experiences, along with shared values and common goals we were going to succeed in solving this problem. The solution had been established, the next step was to create an innovative and creative approach.

Innovative Approach

First I need to describe what Lyme disease is before deciding on an innovative approach. The CDC states that Lyme disease is the most common vector-borne disease in the United States. Lyme disease is caused by the bacterium *Borrelia burgdorferi* and rarely, *Borrelia mayonii*. It is transmitted to humans through the bite of infected blacklegged ticks (2022). I determined that I probably contracted Lyme disease while I was working at Fort Drum in upstate New York. Although I do not recall getting bit by a tick or having a rash of any kind, this was the only place I had been in the last year where Lyme disease had been recorded in the tick population. I had no tick bites that required tick removal, nor do I recall having been bit by anything that caused a rash or fever. According to the MayoClinic, not everyone will have a rash or even know they were bitten by a diseased tick (2020).

When I figured out when and where I contracted the Lyme disease I was able to determine that I was well past the acute stage. Based on how I felt before antibiotics, during prophylactic treatment, and then noticed the return of my symptoms when off the meds, I realized that I was in the chronic stages of Lyme disease. My primary care doctor didn't know how to treat my condition. According to him and the Western medicine approach, oral antibiotics

should have worked. They didn't and after long hours of searching the internet, I found that "Western" medicine was not going to help me.

My innovative approach was (is) going to go against the Western medicine ideals and treat my illness with a natural holistic approach. I wanted to attack the bacteria using what nature provided. Nature gave me the disease and nature was going to be my solution. I have been part of and working in the medical field for just over 15 years, I trusted this way of health care wholeheartedly. I trusted in science having the answers. Now it has failed me and I had to go against everything I knew and trusted to figure out a solution so that I could feel healthy again.

I remembered Brene Brown's book *Daring Greatly*. I needed to have the courage to be vulnerable if I wanted to transform the way I lived, loved, parented, and led (Brown, 2012). I went against everything I knew and put myself out there in the search for an alternative choice. This made me feel unsure, insecure, and fearful of being scrutinized. I chose to move past my vulnerability because I was tired of the shell of a person that I had become over the last year. My significant other deserves to have his partner, friend, and lover back, my kids needed all of me, not the overly tired non-involved mom I had become, and as far as everyone else I wanted to be the best version of myself. "Vulnerability is not knowing victory or defeat, it's understanding the necessity of both; it's engaging. It's being all in" (Brown, 2012, pg. 2). We were ready to go all in on this problem, even if it meant turning our backs on "scientific" medicine. (Disclaimer: I still work in the medical field. I do still believe that Western medicine works for a lot of illnesses. Not just this one.)

Emotional Intelligence

Over the past year if I were to grade my level of emotional intelligence I would give it an 'F'. Every feeling, every emotion, every thought I was radiating outwards. I was exhausted, in

pain, anxious, borderline depressed, and had zero patience. I just did not feel good and I could not hide it, I had no control. My doctor was just throwing medications at me to treat my symptoms, I was suffering and everyone knew it, but did not know how to help. I had become unapproachable in almost every aspect of my life. No one knew how to help me, let alone myself.

I would say that my level and understanding of emotional intelligence (E.I.) was low. This capstone project allowed me to learn how to develop my E.I. Metacognition was the beginning of this journey. Riel & Martin said that “metacognition is about understanding our own thinking and controlling that thinking” (2017, pg.44). Metacognition is probably the most important tool I used in becoming more self-aware. I realized that I had been sick for so long because I was relying on my blind trust in the medical world. Once I realized my original thought process I instantly started to “think about my own thinking” (Riel & Martin, 2017, pg. 43). I asked myself questions as to why I was thinking the way I was. Why did I let this go on so long? It was because of that trust. When I discovered my ‘why’, I immediately changed my thinking process. I had to be vulnerable and reach out into the unknown world of holistic health and natural medicine.

Once I started to become more self-aware, my awareness of others had become clear. There had been significant impacts on my household that I had been blind to. We were all just living in survival mode with very little fun to be had. They all knew I just needed to sleep, they respectfully let me. This meant they were making sacrifices to meet my needs and that just wasn't fair. When we, my primary stakeholders and I, sat down I told them that I wasn't fully aware of the situation until now. I discovered We were all ready for a change and we were going to do it together. We were going to solve this problem and make a better future.

Creative Thinking

Creating choices is not always easy. With “metacognition, empathy, and creativity there is potential to provide the foundation for richer decision making” (Reil & Martin, 2017, pg. 43). Metacognition demanded that I fully embrace and understand my thought process. This was done in the emotional intelligence phase of this project. I needed to understand where my ideas came from and why I thought that way. Empathy is connecting with another person’s feelings and understanding them. Feeling empathy for my stakeholders will allow me to understand their need for a solution and why it is so important. These were both explored during the emotional intelligence step of this project. It is creativity that is going to create the magnitude of solutions we are wanting to discover. If we could imagine everything that is possible instead of settling for one single answer we could create a unique solution that meets everyone's needs.

Using the model templates and the pro/pro charts provided in *Creating Great Choices* (Riel & Martin, 20217) we were able to determine that we all thought food and activity were a major commonality between our two primary options. Then we created a third option/model that was going to fit our overall goal. We needed to make a complete lifestyle overhaul. This is how our innovative solution came to life.

Innovative Solution

Together as a family, we agreed that clean eating was a priority. We all had some sort of gut issue, constant headaches, focus problems, and for some of the older stakeholders stiffness with joint pain and swelling. We took on the challenge of a whole house health makeover. This was going to solve many personal health problems, not just mine. Everyone was going to cut out refined and processed foods, eat more fruits and vegetables, and focus on non-inflammatory foods in general. For my kids that was going to be a difficult task, I just asked them to try their

best and help keep me focused on my personal goals. I also took on the challenge of finding a doctor in the area that was familiar with Lyme disease and its lifelong side effects.

We did a house cleanse to get rid of food that was not on the list. With an exception for the kids. We limited foods that the kids liked for snacks to one area and asked them to be ‘frugal’ with their snacking. With a well-planned grocery list, meal planning and prepping, and weekly goal setting we were able to work together to stay on track. Now remember my energy levels were pretty low so everyone had to work together to help us succeed. Optimizing our nutrition with these critical nutrients may help our immune systems fight off Lyme disease (along with overall improved health) more effectively (Christensen, 2022).

As far as activity level we all recognized we could use more. Issac Newton said, “A body in motion, stays in motion.” We had to address what types of activities, exercises, and/or types of “motions” we wanted to take part in. Each one of us has a separate routine, for safety issues. For me, I need low impact, low weight, and high rep. I chose to include my pets in my routine, two birds with one stone. Walking and body weight exercises are what I focused on. My kids are growing, so as long as they are getting out of the house riding bikes, swimming, etc. they are meeting their needs. My significant other likes weights and resistance training, he will be focusing on these types of exercises.

Results

Between changes in food and activity level, we expected to see some changes. Slowly and surely I started to notice a shift in my energy levels, the kids seemed happier, and overall the house felt a bit better (if that makes any sense). Of course, we are human and we aren’t always perfect. It’s been trial and error for me to find foods that have positive effects on my health. I have had some relapses in symptoms which caused a rippling effect. My kids have had a hard

time adjusting to regulating their food/snack quality and quantity. I expected this and we tried our best to work through their frustrations. This required some adjustments and edits to the grocery list and snacks available. My partner works on the road so eating healthy options can be difficult, but he has done pretty well. He worked out regularly while at home, but on the road, exercise was a bit difficult. He works 12-16 hour days and sleep is what he needs more than anything.

Overall, for me personally, I would like to have seen more weight loss than I have had, but I have to remember that my body is still healing and needs time to catch up. Now that I am graduating and can take college coursework out of my busy schedule I will be able to focus more on optimal foods and more exercise. I am also making appointments with nutritionists and a doctor in the Boise area that specializes in immune therapy. I am hoping to include my partner in these appointments as well since he also suffers from some chronic health issues. My children are doing great and are ready to have 'mom' back to normal.

As far as my other stakeholders they have enjoyed the changes as well. My pets are enjoying their walks again. My extended family has noticed that I have been more and more likely to stay and visit. My co-workers aren't as worried about me passing out at work and have noticed that I can stay focused and keep up on my patient load. My patients have gotten a more involved, empathetic caregiver, which is the whole reason why I love health care.

Conclusion

This capstone project has come to an end. I have learned so much throughout the BAS program. I plan on taking my newly acquired skills forward, continuing my journey to optimal health, being a well-rounded leader, and being the best parent I can be with the problem-solving tools and leadership skills that have been provided. Even though this specific project was only a

few weeks long, it only scratched the surface of solving my problem. The program gave me the tools to build the foundation. The capstone course helped me build the walls and put a roof on it. It's currently being filled with everything a 'house' needs to function. Soon everything will come together and be finished. The final goal will be reached. But like any other home, continued maintenance is required to keep it from crumbling down. With an innovative approach and creativity, everything will come together.

Creativity isn't a gift, and it isn't a solitary act.

It's hard work, and it's a collaborative process.

And it is something each one of us can cultivate

–Creating Great Choices

By

Jennifer Riel and Rover Maring

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