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The Ambulance Driver's Perspective

What do you bring to every call?

Your state of mind during EMS calls can make all the difference

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Many years ago in college, I first learned of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle from several of my professors. For those of you unfamiliar with the concept, German physicist Werner Heisenberg proposed in 1927 that there is a fundamental limit to how precisely one can measure two interrelated variables. He explained that in particle physics, the more precisely you can measure the position of a particle, the less precisely you can measure its momentum, and vice versa. There is always an element of uncertainty in such systems.

Now, my algebra and physics professors were prone to waxing rhapsodic about the subject at greater length than 99% of students were [willing to listen](#). If needed, you can [read the Wikipedia article on the subject](#). It's a real page turner, edge-of-your-seat kinda stuff.

Personally, I'd rather drink a beer and watch this week's episode of "[The Mandalorian](#)." I know less about particle physics than I know what I did to make [Nancy Magee](#) angry with me this time, and I am unlikely to learn more about either.

But my zoology professor introduced me to a related principle, [the observer effect](#), that applies to much of what we do in science, nature, and yes, even EMS.

In a nutshell, the observer effect states that it is impossible to observe and record natural behavior of a system (or animal, or patient), because the mere act of observation alters that behavior. We're the variable that alters natural behavior.



The next funny or warm encounter is possible on the very next call because you bring it with you.
(Photo/Getty Images)

So last night in the shower, I was struck by an epiphany and found myself shouting excitedly to the living room, “Nancy, write this down! ‘The observer effect of humor!’”

Nancy, her natural behavior altered by my shout, did something entirely uncharacteristic: she wrote it down exactly as I said it. Later, she returned to her natural behavior and began peppering me with questions, interrupting my explanations, interjecting ideas of her own, until I lost my train of thought. But luckily, she wrote it down while it was still fresh.

Don’t bag on my creative process here, people. This is how the magic happens at Casa de Ambulance Driver.

The patient care variable

One common question I get from readers of my book is, “Kelly, did all this stuff really happen? How did you run so many funny calls?”

Yes, they really happened, and the reason I encounter so many funny calls is that I bring the funny with me.

I bring the burnout, cynicism and sarcasm, too.

I bring the [compassion](#).

I bring the skepticism.

On a bad day, I even bring the anger and rudeness.

I am the variable that patients encounter that changes their natural behavior.

Sure, when you make a living as a storyteller, every tale gets richer in the retelling, but you can’t embellish what isn’t already there. I encounter so many funny calls because I choose to look for the humor in a given situation, and if you look hard enough, you can generally find it. When the humor isn’t there, I’ll provide it myself because those are the times when everyone needs a tension-breaker the most.

And just like finding the humor, if you look hard enough for cynicism, distrust and anger, you’ll find those too. They’re an element of every call; it’s just a matter of whether we choose to mine them. If I’m being honest with myself, in the vast majority of calls where I had an unpleasant encounter, I brought a healthy dose of the bad attitude with me. Patients, caregivers or family mirrored my attitude, or I *chose* to mirror theirs.

How attitude can impact the patient experience in EMS

That choice is one we all have – [what parts of our careers we focus on](#). It took me a long time to realize that the key to finding a way out of my depression is to focus more on the things that make me happy.

Remember that the next time you need something to lighten the burden a bit. The next funny or warm encounter is possible on the very next call because you bring it with you.

About the author

Kelly Grayson, NRP, CCP, is a critical care paramedic in Louisiana. He has spent the past 24 years as a field paramedic, critical care transport paramedic, field supervisor and educator. He is president of the Louisiana Society of EMS Educators and a board member of the LA Association of Nationally Registered EMTs.

He has an Associate of General Studies degree from Louisiana State University at Eunice, Nunez Community College. Kelly has been recognized as the 2016 Louisiana Paramedic of the Year, 2002 Louisiana EMS Instructor of the Year and 2002 Louisiana AHA Regional Faculty of the Year, and with the 2012 Maggie Award for Best Regularly Featured Web Column/Trade and the 2014 Folio Eddie Award for Best Online Column.

He is a frequent EMS conference speaker and contributor to various EMS training texts, and is the author of the popular blog [A Day In the Life of an Ambulance Driver](#), "En Route: A Paramedic's Stories of Life, Death and Everything In Between," and "On Scene: More Stories of Life, Death and Everything In Between." You can follow him on Twitter ([@AmboDriver](#)), [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#), or email him at kelly@ambulancedriverfiles.com. Kelly is a member of the [EMS1 Editorial Advisory Board](#).

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