

What the Escalator Was Trying to Say

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One of the hazards of my work is time spent in airports. While I greatly enjoy meeting with DCs across the country and participating in major events, flying is not my favorite part of the journey.

A delayed flight recently resulted in two hours of standing near an escalator that was out of service. I prefer to stand at airports, rather than sit; not only is this a much healthier option,^{1,4} but I tend to be more kinetic than most people. I am known to pace while on conference calls and stand while playing video games.

The "down" escalator was not functioning, but there was no barrier or sign making travelers aware of the fact. The reactions differed as each person reached the non-functioning escalator, but fit into three basic categories:

- *I can't do it* - Travelers who couldn't carry their "carry-on" luggage backed away, seeking relief from a nearby elevator.
- *I'll push through it* - Travelers who couldn't lift their carry-on bag proceeded down the escalator with a loud klunk, klunk klunk...
- *No problem* - Some just picked up their bags and walked down the steps.

What the people didn't notice is that the non-functioning escalator was actually revealing something about *them*. Their respective reactions should have spoken loudly about their ability to function, rather than the convenience they were forced to forgo.

By not moving, the escalator was allowing each person to test their strength and agility. Instead of muttering about the broken elevator, those who backed away should have asked themselves why they weren't able to walk down the stairs while carrying their bag, and how they need to change their lifestyle to regain the functionality they have obviously lost.

These travelers are much like our patients in the way they react to their health. The broken escalator is like back pain (or any pain) that tells a patient there is something wrong with them. Sadly, like the decision to take the elevator, many patients ignore the warning and seek an easy solution (drugs) to speed them on their way. Still other patients just push through life, never addressing the cause of their dysfunction.

As we know, health isn't just about how you feel; it's also about what you can and can't do. Something that isn't working signals us that attention is required to resolve the problem. It may require a change of lifestyle or additional care. Ignoring that signal is at the least, irresponsible and at the worst, reckless.

As you would expect, the maintenance man eventually came, assessed the situation, made an adjustment and got the escalator working. In doing so, he eliminated the irritation that alerted people to their dysfunction. The escalator was now fully functional, even though many of those using it weren't.

Perhaps a certain amount of pain / irritation is an important part of life. Maybe our "pain" helps us

see where we need to do something better, put more effort in or take a different approach. It may point to the need to develop new skills, gain greater education or implement better technology. This can be true in our practice / business, family / relationships and personal growth / journey.

Where is *your* pain / irritation, and what is it trying to tell you? Don't be like the people who refused to hear what the escalator was trying to tell them.

References

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