

# STORY HIGHLIGHT

## DR. CYNTHIA STONNINGTON'S "WHY I'M HERE" STORY



Dr. Cynthia Stonnington is Professor of Psychiatry and has been a practicing psychiatrist in Arizona for more than 32 years, with the past 19 years at Mayo Clinic in Arizona. She was the previous Chair of Psychiatry and Psychology and now is enjoying her role as Associate Medical Director for the Office of Joy and Well-Being at Mayo Clinic in Arizona.

### **The patient I will never forget.**

So there I was, a fledgling psychiatrist starting a private practice in Phoenix, Arizona. I was treating patients who entrusted me to help them, and I felt excited! But also nervous. I thought to myself "was I skilled and experienced enough?" I didn't know about imposter syndrome back then, but I sure felt that way.

One of my first patients was Angela; a woman who was very depressed, struggling, and hopeless. She was demoralized both at her work and in her relationship her husband. Growing up, she never felt good enough. She suffered from persistent depression and anxiety, having failed a couple medication trials already. I wanted to help her, but I was also lacking confidence in myself and overwhelmed by a pressure to fix her.

And then I stumbled into this simple question. "Angela, what do you most want to change about your life or situation?" Angela replied, "I want to have children, but I don't feel it will be possible given my medication. I am already overweight, and I worry that I won't lose the baby fat even if I did get pregnant. Plus, I feel bored in my job and want to be recognized for my abilities."

So besides finding a more effective medication, each time we met, we stayed specifically focused on each of those hopes. I reminded her of what she wanted and empowered her to find ways to overcome the barriers. And guess what? She ended having a healthy baby girl despite being on medications! She returned to her pre-baby weight afterwards and she was promoted at work.

I subsequently left private practice, but each year she tracks me down and sends me a holiday card with a picture of her family (ultimately 3 lovely children and a seemingly happy marriage) and I have been able to watch her family grow up from afar. I continue to be so proud of her and also of myself.

Now I know to invite my patients to connect to their "why" by sharing what they really want to achieve with me and in their life. It turns out that it keeps me connected to my "why" as well.

**I would love to ask you: what is your "why" story?**