

Ankle Story

By Anne Davies

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This is a personal assessment story. On July 14, 2009, I broke my ankle. I wasn't doing anything interesting or exotic – no dancing on tables. I was just walking along when, hidden under a white line painted on the pavement, there was a change in level. My foot suddenly rolled out from under me and I fell, hitting the ground hard. First-aid paramedics examined me thoroughly, decided it was probably just sprained, gave me ice, assisted me back to the car, and recommended I see a doctor within 24 hours. They were helpful and kind.

Later that evening, my husband, Stewart, insisted on taking me to our local hospital emergency room. After a long wait, the x-ray technician came for me and took three x-rays to capture different views of my ankle. As she began to ready me for a return to the waiting room, I asked, "So is it just a sprain?" "No, actually it's broken – but I'm not supposed to tell you," she said as she wheeled me back to the waiting room.

So it was official. I had a broken ankle. Stewart and I continued to sit in the Emergency Room, waiting for the doctor to determine whether I needed to see an orthopedic surgeon or not. We were both tired, but as we watched the events in the busy ER unfold, we both gained a renewed appreciation for how lucky we were. It was only a broken ankle.

Midnight arrived and we were moved to a new examination room. When it was finally my turn, the doctor arrived, introduced himself and said, "Here are your x-rays. Look at this." He drew a circle around part of the ankle. "This is where it is broken. Do you want a fiberglass cast or an air cast? The air cast will cost \$100.00."

"Can I shower with the air cast?" I asked.

"Yes."

"An air cast, please."

"Okay, the nurse will be in to fit you and show you how to use it."

We said thank you. He said good-bye.

We waited some more. The nurse arrived with a cast and showed me how to use it, emphasizing a few things such as ensuring the heel is well back before strapping in the ankle and being careful not to lose the tool that inflates and deflates the gel pack. Then she offered me a wheelchair. Since I'd just been fitted with a walking cast, I chose to walk. The cast was heavy and I moved slowly. I was exhausted but it was over. We were going home at last.

The next day, I dragged my tired, achy left leg around the house and the yard, with my ankle throbbing. At 1 pm, Stewart and I headed in to see our holistic doctor. He looked at me, looked at my cast, and said, "What have you done?" I handed him the print copy of my x-rays the ER doctor had given me. He examined it, examined my ankle and began to describe what I needed to do. He said, "No weight on your ankle for 4 – 6 weeks. Get a wheelchair and crutches. You need to take calcium with minerals and vitamin C every night and every morning. Put ice on your ankle every two hours. Then, soak it in hot water with sea salt."

As he spoke, I grabbed an envelope from my purse and began writing. He continued, "Lie down with your ankle raised. Sleep as much as you can. Rest. Stretch it, very gently, like this." (He showed me how to stretch it.) "If you have pain, stop. Do your upper body exercises. Come back to see me next week." We talked about where I could rent a wheelchair and crutches, and he sent me off with his prognosis: "You will be fine. This will heal well. Just do as I tell you."

Consider this story from an assessment perspective. The ER doctor looked at the evidence and made an evaluation (assessment OF learning). He named the trauma. It was important to do so. I left the hospital thinking the cast was all I needed.

My holistic doctor – someone trained in sports medicine and a variety of healing methods – confirmed the diagnosis and gave me the kind of detailed feedback and next steps I needed so I could begin to self-monitor my way to good health (assessment FOR learning). To do this he gathered more information about my new circumstances and put it together with what he already knew about my health. He didn't stop there. He gave me specific next steps. He cautioned me about criteria that would let me know whether I was on track or not. He arranged for me to see him for frequent assessments and, over time, he gave me specific feedback and added to the instructions.

Under his direction, I extended my exercises and fine-tuned my health supplements. At the end of two weeks, he showed me how to begin weight-bearing exercises. After four weeks, he said I could begin to shuffle around the house without crutches while continuing to use my crutches for short distances out of doors. He gave me strict orders to use the wheelchair for any distance. After six weeks, he said I could walk out of doors but I had to continue using the wheelchair for long distances. I still had to use hot and cold packs every evening or whenever there was any pain.

During each visit, he examined my ankle thoroughly. Each time he gave me enough information to take care of my own health between appointments. I could self-assess and take appropriate action because he was teaching me how to make decisions and take actions that would lead to healing. At the time of this writing, it has been 12 weeks since I broke my ankle and now it is completely healed. I walk and move as I always did, but with a new appreciation for mobility. I am back in the gym rebuilding my strength. I take delight daily in my good health.

As I reflect on this experience from an assessment perspective, I can appreciate the role of assessment OF learning as represented by the ER staff and the doctor who made the decisions in terms of surgery and treatment. This was important information, but not sufficient for me. As a person who values good health, I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the holistic doctor who helped me heal.

While the holistic doctor also engaged in assessment OF learning (providing a second opinion of the x-rays), he went further than a simple diagnosis. His emphasis was on assessment FOR learning – helping me get from a broken ankle to good health. He couldn't do my healing for me, so he helped me understand how to self-monitor my way to good health. I had to learn to give myself ongoing feedback and decide appropriate next steps. The list he gave me of what to watch for, what to do, and when to do it allowed me to follow a pathway to good health. Without his willingness and ability to share his knowledge with me, I couldn't be a partner in my own healing process. He needed to engage in a process that involved assessment FOR learning – a valuable process that works in all facets of our lives.