

Thriving in Chaos—Strategies to Get Control of Time and Your Life

Kanya Ferguson, MD, and Karolyn Wanat, MD, FAAD

Interviewed by Macartney Welborn, MD

MACARTNEY WELBORN, MD: Hello, everyone. Welcome to another episode of *Dialogues in Dermatology*. My name is Macartney Welborn, and I am a dermatology resident from the University of Florida College of Medicine. Today's topic centers around Thriving in Chaos—Strategies to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life. In this episode, I'm honored to be joined by Dr. Kari Wanat and Dr. Kanya Ferguson, who will help guide us through this topic.—

--Kari is an Associate Professor of Dermatology and Dermatopathology, as well as Residency Program Director at the Medical College of Wisconsin. She completed her dermatology residency and dermatopathology fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania and also has a certificate in tropical medicine, which she completed in Lima, Peru. Kanya is an Associate Professor of Dermatology and Cosmetic Surgery at the University of Iowa Health Care. She completed both her dermatology residency as well as her Mohs fellowship there, as well. She practices Mohs surgery but also has a general dermatology clinic, where she is focused on the care of skin of color patients.—

--So welcome to the podcast, Kari and Kanya. We are honored to have you and thank you so much for taking the time out of your busy schedules to sit down with us.

KANYA FERGUSON, MD: Thank you so much for having us.

KAROLYN WANAT, MD, FAAD: Thank you, we're so excited to be here.

MACARTNEY WELBORN, MD: Can you share with the audience a little bit about yourselves? What your weekly clinic life is like, work life responsibilities outside of clinic? Whether or not you have families, significant others, things like this?

KAROLYN WANAT, MD, FAAD: I am currently in a thriving dermatology and dermatopathology practice, where I split between doing clinical dermatology, supervising residents in many of those clinics, as well as doing dermatopathology two days a week. I also serve as the consult director for our inpatient consults here at Medical College of Wisconsin. I really love what I do and so that interplay of different specialties and practices is really enjoyable to me.—

--In addition, I'm married and have three young children. I have a 5-year-old boy and 3-year-old twins, all boys as well. And so certainly both in my work life and personal life, things are a little bit crazy at multiple times, and sometimes we don't know which way is up in both of those areas.

KANYA FERGUSON, MD: I am at the University of Iowa Health Care, where I primarily practice as a Mohs surgeon. With staffing changes over the last year with COVID, I am doing a lot of Mohs, so I do four days a week and then I have a half day of general dermatology clinic. I am also very pleased to work within our graduate medical education office on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives as the Director of DEI in that office. I have two young kids that are 6 and almost 4. And then we thought that our life was not crazy enough, so we got a COVID puppy, so now we have a black Labrador in the mix.

MACARTNEY WELBORN, MD: Awesome, thanks so much. Can you both tell us how you got interested in this topic? Was there a particular life event or a time in your career where you felt your life was true chaos? Kari, can you get us started with that?

KAROLYN WANAT, MD, FAAD: I think the chaos in my life has always been present. In fact, I sort of called myself like the Wanat Tornado at different periods of my life. But I think everything really sort of came together the year that I moved from University of Iowa to Medical College of Wisconsin, which was followed six months later of having twin boys. Which was followed three months later by having one of my partners leave practice. And then followed another six months

later by COVID. And I feel like all of those life changes at once, as well as with a growing family and growing responsibility with an academic practice, really had caused chaos would probably be the best word. And basically at that point, it was surviving chaos and not coming any close to thriving.

KANYA FERGUSON, MD: I would say for me pretty similar. It was right after I had my second child. And I think very quickly realized that I had to do the same amount of work, if not more, in a less period of time. And so I think I really became interested in this topic because I felt like I was at a point where I really was overwhelmed with everything that I had to do and didn't really have good organizational kind of tools in order to manage it. At our institution, we have Dr. Susan Johnson who does a lot of our time management task management education for faculty.—

--And so I had the opportunity to do some one-on-one coaching. And it was really through some of her work that we started to write our presentation. That was really helpful in bringing this in a very stepwise fashion, to really tangible tools to kind of control the chaos.

MACARTNEY WELBORN, MD: Definitely. I think all practicing dermatologists and dermatology residents can relate to having stressful times or constant stress in their lives. So can you guys start to go over some of the tips and tools that one can use to try and take control of the chaos and even thrive in it in these time periods? And if we could start with Kanya, that would be great.

KANYA FERGUSON, MD: Again, as part of our presentation we kind of talk about where to start. You have just an incredible amount of work. And I think when we talk about thriving in chaos, I think really that things kind of ebb and flow. Sometimes you feel good about things, okay, I feel like I'm keeping up on things. And then just some life or work disaster happens and really I think it derails you. So a lot of our tips are just kind of where to start, right? So starting from very basic things, like working from a clear space, just keeping track of your time commitments.—

--Planning by the week and really doing it now. Setting a timer, removing distractions, and either taking notes or having just a central base to really put this together. So as you're synthesizing and really trying to start at a place for organizing this further, it's just having that as a stepwise fashion. And Kari talks a lot about taking a breath and pausing and really kind of evaluating what you have.

KAROLYN WANAT, MD, FAAD: And to piggyback off that, a lot of what Susan Johnson talks about is Code O. So in this period of chaos, we have Code O, which is feeling overwhelmed. And we all are really good at taking care of our patients and resuscitating patients who are in a state of anarchy. And now, we really want to focus more on ourselves and resuscitating ourselves from the Code O, or overwhelm. And as Kanya mentioned, basically a lot of the things that we want to do, the very, very first steps are basically stop and take a deep breath.—

--Because when you're in that feeling of overwhelmed-ness and out of control, you want to just pause and breathe. And then the second step is really instead of trying to go faster, trying to get through things, you actually want to actually slow down and think about the things that you have to accomplish. And even just trying to accomplish the smallest task, like as Kanya mentioned, clearing off your desk, you may feel a new sense of purpose in your life and sort of being able to reset and sort of moving forward.—

--And really then from those resuscitation, implementing the strategies as Kanya mentioned, to be sort of ready, relaxed, and resilient going forward can really reset your stage and get you back to the thriving that you wanted to be at.

MACARTNEY WELBORN, MD: I know you guys both mentioned staying organized in the long term and even on a weekly basis. So can you guys go over how you both stay organized and keep track of the tasks that need to be done on a daily basis?

KAROLYN WANAT, MD, FAAD: I think the staying organized on a daily, weekly, monthly basis requires intention and thought and purpose behind it. I've gone through a couple different task managers and strategies, but one of the very first things that Susan Johnson mentions is just making a list of everything you have to do, both in your personal life, your professional life. And making that list and sort of then categorizing that list of things that must be done, so these are sort of non-negotiables, versus are really important to be done but can wait for a period of time, and then that category of our "are they really important and do I really need to do that."—

--My personal strategy is to start on a weekly basis and take a look at my week ahead and see which days are busier, which days do I have certain things planned, what do I need to do to prepare for those functions coming up, those meetings, those deadlines, things like that. And then I also look at a monthly timeframe, so I know that I have a presentation in a month and I have a reminder for me to work on that or actually scheduled for a certain block of time to be able to accomplish that. And then certainly looking at the yearlong schedule, to know what the big things that are coming and sort of always having that on the radar.—

--And so I sort of live and die by my calendar that I also share with my husband, so I know what sort of personal obligations that we have, or share successfully most of the time with him, so we know about personal obligations and how those sort of fit in. And then really try to be intentional about scheduling time to do things. And that includes even scheduling time to work on emails, to work with the Epic inbox, and to accomplish the things that need to be done.—

--And then in addition, I think it also is really important to schedule time for personal things and I know Kanya will talk more about that. But the first thing I do in the morning when I get up is I work out. I try not to look at any of my other things, so that I have that designated time which is really important to me. And then everything else can usually wait. Otherwise, the activities I have will sort of chew into that personal time.

KANYA FERGUSON, MD: I think to add a little bit more from that master list, as Kari had mentioned, then you plan by the week. And then you take that further and plan by the day, what can I get done today. And I think one of the pitfalls that I've run into is I have this very ambitious long daily list and maybe can get through two or three times with the time that I have in the day. And I think that's also very crushing as well, too, and again you continue to get behind.—

--So one thing I think is helpful is actually creating a time map. And just thinking about your time map as kind of having your days, Monday through Sunday, starting at 5:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. and really mapping out where your priorities are. So for me, I'll map out when I have surgery, when I have clinic, when I'm going to work out, when I'm going to spend time with my family. And I think that helps you, in creating this time map, really seeing do your priorities align with where you're spending time throughout your week.—

--And then within that time map, you find your time blocks, where you have time to get your tasks done. And then you can make very realistic daily lists, based on the time that you have, and then able to check the box off on that. And I think what was great during our session, we talked about different places where to keep your master list and then your weekly and daily to-do list. It was great to hear that there's a lot of different platforms, from paper notebook to more reusable, things like Rocketbook, but then a whole bunch of online platforms, from Todoist, to Trello, to Things, someone had talked about Fantastical, One Note, and so forth.—

--I think what we've really found is that the best task management tool is the one that you use consistently and the one that you'll continue to add things to your master list, that you'll continue to check things off, and look at on a daily basis.

MACARTNEY WELBORN, MD: Those are all really excellent tips. One of the things you guys briefly mentioned, but maybe one of you could go into a little bit more, is when you have those larger projects. So it's easy when you have a short task that's a few minutes and you can just

knock that right out, but can you guys just go a little bit more into detail when you have a larger project? Are you putting away big chunks of time? Do you find yourself more using little moments of time everywhere, to kind of try and put it all together? And Kari, if you can take that away, that would be great.

KAROLYN WANAT, MD, FAAD: I wish. Previous life, pre-kids, pre more responsibilities, I could just sit down for a day and knock out big projects, and that's no longer the reality. And so now, I try to take the bigger projects and divide it into smaller chunks. And taking those smaller chunks that are really doable. So maybe the first chunk is doing a PubMed lit search. And that's going to take me 15 minutes. And I try to do that and I think a great tip is trying to do that before checking email. Or trying to do that before logging into your Epic inbox or EMR. Or doing that before you do something else.—

--Because if you don't do that immediately, then you'll sort of go down the rabbit hole of inbox messages, both in the Outlook or your EMR. And then basically taking that big project and really chunking out like 10 to 15 minute, 30 minute chunks of what you're going to do. And even if it's writing one paragraph and doing that. And by doing that on a regular basis, I find that I can accomplish a lot more than when I had a big chunk of time, because I get distracted or working on other things. And trying to continue to use those small chunks and schedule those throughout my week has been a beneficial change.—

--And I think Kanya also had taught me a skill which maybe I'll take away. Is that basically before you leave at the end of the day, open up what you're going to work on for the very first thing that you do in the morning. So the first thing you see when you turn on your computer or go back to your computer is that task, as opposed to your email or Epic inbox. And that way, you know where you're going to start. You know, okay, I'm going to do this paragraph, I'm going

to do this PubMed search, I'm going to write these emails for my collaborators, X, Y, or Z, and then you can sort of get going right away in the morning.

KANYA FERGUSON, MD: I echo that. That's just so incredibly important and I would say that I think if you don't break it up until little tasks, then it becomes this big task that in your mind, okay, I need three to four hours to complete this. And guess what? You'll never have that chunk of time. So it is, I agree, important to break it up into chunks and doable tasks.

MACARTNEY WELBORN, MD: Thank you so much for that advice. So something that we talked a lot about is email in our conversation so far. And I think it's one of the biggest burdens that we all struggle with. Some of us are great about it, some of us have hundreds or thousands of unread email. Do you guys have any strategies or approaches to your email and things you do to keep it under control?

KANYA FERGUSON, MD: So one thing, I think depending on what email platform that you use, actually understand how to use your email. Understand the shortcuts and the tips and the tricks, so that when you do have time to go through email that you're as efficient as possible. There's some main things that we kind of talk about in our talk, is that set up your environment so that it's ideal, so you're not getting alerts and messages and you're not being dinged every time a new message comes in, because that's another distractor. I think creating things like automatic signature blocks, so that you're not typing in the same thing every single time with your emails.—

--Optimize your view, so you're seeing as much as you can in just one screen, so you're not having to toggle back and forth between your calendar and your main email. Making sure that you're keeping with just some good rules of composition, like kind of keep your emails pretty clear and brief. Be very informative in your subject line. If you're needing to scroll down in the

email, your email is too long. And then other tips and tricks that I think are based on kind of how to, when you use email such as Outlook that we use at our institution.—

--The other thing that I think is really important is creating folders and having efficient folders, so that it's easy to drop information emails into and that are easily accessible for finding emails later. Kari, you may have a few things that you want to jump on and talk about?

KAROLYN WANAT, MD, FAAD: I agree wholeheartedly with everything that Kanya said. And I think touching email once is really important, as well. So I think I have been in the habit in the past of sort of casually looking at email and then making it read, unread, and back and forth. And that creates a lot of unnecessary time. And so really being thoughtful about when am I going to work on email. When I work on email, can I address it right away? Do I move it to a project status? Or is this something that's going to take more time and so I'm going to reschedule that to work on tomorrow, when I have more time to reply to my collaborator to X, Y, or Z about things.—

--But things that you don't need to sort of do, if you find that you're always deleting an email when it comes in, pausing and taking some time to unsubscribe from that, or put it to your junk mail folder, or actually have it be an automatic rule where it goes to some folder. So if you never read your journal articles as they're being sent to you in that immediate time, put them to a folder so you know where they are and you can go there when you need to access them. But touching an email one time can be really beneficial.

MACARTNEY WELBORN, MD: That sounds great. I definitely need to work on that, it's definitely a skill. So diverting topics a little bit, I know a lot of us have kids, are planning to have kids, hope to have kids soon. Do you guys have any advice on people that have families and are wanting to more manage their work and their family life balance?

KANYA FERGUSON, MD: I think with anything when we're talking about time management and task management that these all have to become habits. And I think if you develop these habits early, then you can use your time very efficiently and kind of use the time that you have, so you can really prioritize that life balance of your family and your work. And it would be my main piece of advice is getting into these habits early. And I think don't be hard on yourself. There's so many times where things are going great and something critical happens, a kid gets sick or I have to cover clinic or so forth.—

--And so just being kind with yourself. You are going to get behind, you are sometimes going to run into pitfalls, and you always just catch back up, especially if you have these habits ingrained.

KAROLYN WANAT, MD, FAAD: And Kanya, I really love what you said, being gentle with yourself. I think we all are in a profession where we've had achieved perfection and things like that. And not writing the perfectly written email and being gentle if you don't accomplish everything on your list, because those lists will still be there tomorrow, right? And so I think just continuing to go through the process, and being resilient, and maintaining that positive, happy attitude, and remembering why we are doing what we're doing I think can go a long way.—

--The last thing I would say about that is I call it work/life imbalance, because I think it's more integration than a balance with that. And I think depending on where you are in your stage of your life, I try to leave work really early to get home to spend time with my kids. That means I do a little bit more work at night after they go to sleep. Also preserving some time for my spouse but that now is a different priority for me than before when I didn't have kids, where I would basically just plan to get everything done and then go home and not have to worry about it. So just figuring out what works best for you in your life, I think you'll find the right stride and balance.

MACARTNEY WELBORN, MD: Thank you guys so much. If you had to summarize all of this for a few key takeaway points or key strategies for our listeners to try and implement in their daily lives, what would you include?

KAROLYN WANAT, MD, FAAD: I think some of the main things I would do is say that we're all working in an imperfect world, in imperfect times. And so just do your best to keep your head above water. Focusing on what's most important to you, so certainly family is always going to come to the top, friends, taking excellent care of patients. Life certainly has become more and more complex. And as time has gone on with COVID and other things, I think that's been really probably a struggle for a lot of us during that period of time.—

--But just try to really hone in on what's the most rewarding part of your job and home life and that will help keep you grounded. And then hopefully some of these skills to keep you more efficient will give you more time to do the things that you love, with the people that you love.

KANYA FERGUSON, MD: That was great, Kari. The only thing I wanted to add was that there's a great quote that I love, that says "You cannot float through each day like a piece of seaweed, drifting on the sea of changing priorities."

MACARTNEY WELBORN, MD: Awesome. Well, thank you, everybody, for joining us today on the *Dialogues in Dermatology* podcast. And a huge thank you to Kari and Kanya for taking the time out of their busy schedules and also for this wonderful information for our listeners. I hope we can all take away a new strategy to help manage our ever-busy and changing lives.

KAROLYN WANAT, MD, FAAD: Thank you.

KANYA FERGUSON, MD: Thank you so much.