

REFRAMING THE IDEA OF NON-NEGOTIABLES

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RECENTLY, an incoming medical student asked me what advice I would give before starting school. I paused longer than I expected to at that. There are the obvious answers about studying, time management, and staying organized, but that felt too basic. What came to mind instead was a small moment from my own medical school orientation, one I had not thought much about at the time.

On the last day of orientation, we were handed a small journal and asked to write down our non-negotiables. The things we were supposed to protect, even when medical school became overwhelming. I remember feeling skeptical, but not dismissive. I wrote a list anyway:

Sleep.

Time with family.

Movement.

Writing.

It felt aspirational, but I decided to try to take it seriously. And I did try. Some weeks I was better at it than others. There were stretches when I slept enough, moved my body, and felt grounded. There were also weeks when none of it happened the way I intended. Early on, I assumed that inconsistency meant I was failing at the idea itself. If I could not protect my non-negotiables every day, then what did it mean to call them that?

Medical school slowly taught me something different. I was learning, often uncomfortably, that perfection was not a standard I could sustain. That lesson showed up everywhere. In exams that did not go as planned. In practice simulations with nursing students where I felt behind instead of prepared. Over time, I began to accept that doing my best, even when it looked uneven, was still enough.

That shift changed how I thought about self-care. I stopped treating my non-negotiables as tasks I needed to execute flawlessly and started seeing them as anchors.

They were not rules meant to be enforced. They were reminders of what mattered to me. On difficult weeks, they helped me notice what had quietly disappeared. On better weeks, they gave structure to what already felt manageable.

I also came to understand that non-negotiable does not mean always achievable. It means important. There were days when sleep mattered more than writing, or when time with family replaced movement. Instead of getting stuck on what I had missed, I became better at asking what I could realistically hold onto in that moment. That shift felt subtle, but it made the difference between giving up on the idea entirely and continuing to return to it.

When I thought back to that incoming student, I realized that this was the advice I wanted to give. Not a list of habits to perfect, but permission to be imperfect without losing sight of what matters. Medical school will take more than you expect some weeks. Other weeks, it will surprise you by giving a little back. The goal is not to protect your non-negotiables every day without fail. The goal is to know what they are, and to notice when you have drifted too far from them.

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Looking back, the value of that journal was never the list itself. It was the practice of naming what mattered to me and giving myself permission to let that definition change over time. Medical school did not teach me how to balance everything. It taught me how to keep showing up with intention, even when things felt unfinished or imperfect. When I finally answered that student, this was what I said: pay attention to what you need, expect that some weeks will be better than others, and keep coming back when things drift. Only afterward did I realize that I was not offering instructions so much as reassurance. Reassurance that falling short does not mean losing sight of what matters, and that self-care is less about doing it perfectly and more about returning to it over time.