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THREE LESSONS I'VE LEARNED AS AN EARLY PROFESSIONAL PTA

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I just recently celebrated my five-year anniversary of working as a physical therapist assistant, and the time has flown by! I look back on when I started, and I can remember feeling like a small fish in a huge pond that was just swimming around aimlessly. As new grads or early professionals, it's easy to feel lost while also feeling the pressure to know everything right away; it's also difficult to know areas to focus on early in our career, which can be overwhelming. Having the time to reflect on these past five years has allowed me to gain clarity on what has impacted me the most as a PTA and allowed me to narrow my focus in order to grow. Here are the top three lessons that I have learned as an early professional PTA:

1. The benefits of having a mentor or accountability partner

I wish I would've spent the time to connect with a mentor in the first couple of years working as a new PTA but have been lucky to have several people that have helped me along the way. PTA programs teach you the meat and potatoes of what you need to know in order to survive as an entry level PTA and to ultimately pass the licensure exam. Once you are practicing without a clinical instructor there to help guide you along the way, it can be intimidating to navigate through the difficult situations or patient cases that we encounter. Having a mentor gives you an outlet and a reliable resource to guide you through those encounters. They provide constructive feedback while allowing you to take ownership of the skills you need to develop or tasks that you need to accomplish. Having a mentor or accountability partner also increases your self-awareness. You realize when you are starting to fall back into old habits, but now you have a person to reach out to get you back on track. Find someone you trust and someone that you can be open and honest with, but also find a person that holds a skillset or position that you are interested in.

2. Soft skills can be just as effective as technical skills

One of the most impactful courses I have taken was led by one of my colleagues which dove into active listening. Listening has been a skill that I've always had confidence in and felt it was one of my best qualities as a PTA. After taking the course it became obvious that my listening skills were not as polished as I initially believed. Our patients put a lot of trust and faith in us to make them feel better or to get them back to their normal activities, but trust is often not built by only instructing them through their exercise program. Making patients feel like they are valued and understood is key in establishing rapport. While our technical and "hard" skills are an important aspect of what we do, sometimes what the patients need goes beyond that. Check your body language, ask the right questions, and make sure you are fully understanding what the patient is saying to you. Something as easy as making eye contact and keeping an open posture towards the patient while they are speaking to you can ease a patient's nerves and make them feel more comfortable in opening up to you. Establishing trust and building a therapeutic alliance will

make the treatment sessions more effective and meaningful for the patient. These communication strategies are important tools we can have in our toolbox for treating all patient types—and that can extend into our normal day to day interactions we have with our friends and family too!

3. Stepping out of your comfort zone leads to growth

In any profession, it's easy to go through the motions to clock in and clock out to get a paycheck. The same rings true for physical therapists and physical therapist assistants if we aren't trying to challenge ourselves. Complacency leads to being stagnant in your role which can quickly lead to burnout. I had a colleague challenge me to step out of my comfort zone a few years ago and it has opened up the door to opportunities that I wouldn't have had otherwise if I had simply just showed up to work. I'll admit, I was nervous. I never looked at myself as being in any type of leadership or coordinator role, but them challenging me allowed me to capitalize on my strengths and use them to my advantage, while also discovering ways to work on my weaknesses. Stepping out of my comfort zone allowed me to fall into roles that have made me feel like I have a purpose, making my job more exciting and meaningful. Uncomfortable and new situations can also lead to meeting new people and getting different perspectives or seeing situations through a different lens. Take a chance on yourself and step out of your box. It can be uncomfortable and scary at first, but the opportunities and relationships that will come from that will be well worth it.

I could go on about all the lessons that I've learned along the way, but these three have seemed to stick with me the most. The cool thing about the physical therapy profession is that it is always changing, and we are always growing. It doesn't matter if you just graduated, or if you have been a PTA for 20+ years, there is always time to learn something new and there is always time to develop yourself. Jump onto new opportunities, find someone to help hold you accountable, and dive into developing new skills or fine tune old skills that help continue to propel you forward. Most of all, find what works for you and make your own blueprint to navigate this exciting profession!