On Friday I was in the middle of a telehealth visit with one of my asthma patients. Just as he was describing a very serious attack that had happened that morning his screen image froze. There was no sound and then the screen went black. Consistent with my belief that computers respond to threats of extreme physical violence, I hurled invective at my device in a loud and most unprofessional way. The screen remained black. I exited the program, returned to the “waiting room” and attempted without success to connect with my patient again.

After repeating the process twice, each time raising the volume of my voice and the level of threat to my laptop, I picked up the phone and called him. He had an explanation for the disruption of the video feed. “Hey, no problem Doc,” he said, “I’m square in the middle of the earthquake neighborhood. My internet goes out every time we have an aftershock, and this one was bigger than usual.” He then resumed his description of his asthma attack and we finished our virtual visit without further mention of geology.

It’s interesting how a larger context affects our interpretation of events. I’m pretty sure both my patient and I would have been much more alarmed and frightened about the disruption of our clinic visit had that small earthquake been the first and not one of the more than 1500 shaking events that have occurred since March 18th. We have been through a real earthquake. We know aftershocks happen. We expect them. We don’t look forward to the vibrations, but we accept their annoying occurrence because we have no alternative. And, having survived a bigger shakeup, we know we can get through these smaller tremors.

The U.S. Geological Survey website reports the following:

“Aftershocks are earthquakes that follow the largest shock of an earthquake sequence. They are smaller than the mainshock and within 1-2 rupture lengths distance from the mainshock. Aftershocks can continue over a period of weeks, months, or years. In general, the larger the mainshock, the larger and more numerous the aftershocks, and the longer they will continue.”

Wikipedia adds that aftershocks are:

“caused as the displaced [earth’s] crust adjusts to the effects of the main shock.”

Our world is still shaking from the mainshock of the COVID-19 pandemic. Just as with the aftershocks that accompany earthquakes, we will have more challenges from this virus in the days ahead. When we get over the peak, and our society starts returning its attention to other serious conditions, there will still be ‘aftershocks’. Some of them will be serious and will remind us of the very worst days we have experienced. But none of them will be as devastating, nor will they hit us as hard as the initial wave of the disease. We are now stronger than we were. We are more resilient than we thought, and we have learned many critically important lessons.

Thanks to your determination, endurance and professionalism we are getting through a worldwide pandemic, a crisis so big that it turned an earthquake into a minor footnote. We even
make jokes about it. *(Did somebody really schedule an aftershock on April 16th for The Great Utah ShakeOut?)*

We’ve had to learn to work from home. That was an early aftershock. We wash our hands so often that our skin is red and cracked. Aftershock. We meet each other through computer screens and not in person. Aftershock. Our curriculum has gone online. Aftershock. We’ve had to change the way we do student assessments. Aftershock. You’re all doing things you’ve never done before and not doing some things that were usual parts of your job. Big aftershock.

I’m honored to work alongside you as we revise, strengthen and perfect what we do while we *adjust* to the effects of the pandemic mainshock. I don’t think there is any challenge too big or too complicated for us to overcome. We’ve gotten used to aftershocks.

Have a good week and make sure you’re taking care of yourselves and your families. We can do this. We *are* doing this.

Wayne