Overheard
Scott Maurer on Emotional Intel

For pediatrician Scott Maurer, work is a practice in empathy. Maurer, associate professor of pediatrics and chief of the Division of Palliative Medicine and Supportive Care at Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC, serves families experiencing the pain of having a child with a chronic or terminal illness. His leadership in the classroom and in the hospital goes beyond teaching the nuts and bolts of patient care; he strives to model and teach emotional intelligence, which he says is necessary to the health of both patients and staff.

How do you and your colleagues maintain the stamina to witness and hold grief every day at work?
Sometimes I offer a kind word, or I pull someone aside when I know they have had a stressful day. I am a firm believer that the human experience is a shared experience. If something happens to you, it is helpful and cathartic if you can tell somebody about it. My colleagues and I are a family, and one person's experience affects the rest of us. I rely on my colleagues as they rely on me.

Is emotional intelligence something that can be learned?
Often people think of communication skills as something that is just part of one’s natural ability, but communication is a teachable skill. I have the honor to be mentored by Bob Arnold, who is head of palliative medicine at Pitt and a cofounder of VitalTalk, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting emotional skills in medical professionals.

I teach students that when dealing with patients and their families, the first step is to expect an emotional response, and then to identify the present emotion, and lastly to follow that observation with an expression of support and understanding.

Why is emotional intelligence crucial to being a successful doctor?
Study after study shows that parents take your medical knowledge for granted, and the way they are going to judge your skills as a physician is how compassionate you are and how well you communicate with them. Medicine is one of those strange things in that you have to rapidly build rapport with somebody. I know if someone trusts me. I have become very good at reading body language and reading nonverbal cues. —Interview by Nichole Faina

Next Generation
When Lauren Goldschen (Class of ’19) was an undergraduate, she witnessed several friends struggle with mental illness. She found that because of stigma, students were often afraid to disclose how they were doing to their friends and family and hesitated to access treatment off campus. While a third-year medical student, Goldschen has secured funding through the Roth Fellow Award to perform a qualitative study focused on how undergraduates cope with eating disorders.
“...This research experience has reinforced the importance of always treating patients’ stories as a gift—not something to take for granted,” Goldschen says.

Daniel Wonjae Chung is passionate about studying the neurobiology of schizophrenia with a focus on targeting the mechanisms of the disease. Chung is in the last year of the MD/PhD Pitt and Carnegie Mellon Medical Scientist Training Program. With David Lewis, MD Distinguished Professor of Psychiatry and Neuroscience and chair of psychiatry, Chung identified a novel synaptic pathology of schizophrenia resulting from an abnormal splicing mechanism. This mechanism could become a therapeutic target to prevent the onset or progression of schizophrenia. Chung has published papers in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences and the American Journal of Psychiatry.

Pitt Med’s Sara Whitlock was picked to contribute a regular column to STAT, the health and science news publication, about her perspective as a grad student. Whitlock is a second-year student in the Molecular Biophysics and Structural Biology Graduate Program at Pitt and Carnegie Mellon University. One of her first STAT columns describes what she sees as a hurdle to American scientific excellence—young people being unwilling to fail. “By normalizing the experience of failure in the pursuit of science,” she writes, “my hope is that we can keep American students in the field, so that we can remain competitive with other countries in uncertain times and in uncertain budgets.” —NF