



Photo by Dianne Dotter

Healing Where it Hurts

Functional Medicine

By RACHAEL SEYMOUR

According to the Institute for Functional Medicine, functional medicine “Provides a framework to systematically identify and address the underlying processes and dysfunctions that are causing imbalance and disease in each individual.” It wants to look at the whole patient and any potential root causes and not just treat symptoms with a standard medication. While it’s not a new practice, the desire to push the boundaries on diagnosing and treating patients has been passed over in the public eye for some time now. But in recent years more and more folks, providers and patients alike, are looking at this fusion of holistic and traditional medicine with new eyes and hope.

Enter Brittany Coburn NP-C and Tom Flass MD, the founders of Functional Medicine Associates of Montana in Kalispell and the newest contributors to *406 Woman* magazine.

Coburn is a nurse practitioner with her focus in functional medicine geared towards family, women and teen health. Dr. Flass specializes in functional pediatrics as well as integrative and functional gastroenterology for adults and children.

Coburn was born in Wyoming then moved to Idaho in 6th grade. She received her Bachelors of Nursing at Idaho State University. In 2006 she attended the Nurse Practitioner Program at Montana State University and stayed in Montana to work and train. It was here that she focused on family medicine. She’s proud that she helped create five school-based health centers along with two mobile units, which helped facilitate growth across the highline.

Born in New York, Flass went to Cornell University then Colorado State University earning bachelors and masters degrees in Nutrition.

He spent the years between degrees working in several nutrition related fields including corporate wellness and the nutritional supplement industry. While looking into PhD programs, he became increasingly aware of how desperately nutritional knowledge was needed in modern medicine. Because of this, he pivoted and ended up attending medical school and completing pediatric residency and gastroenterology fellowship at University of Colorado. He decided to move to Montana after hearing it was sorely missing specialists in his field of pediatrics.

Despite their different backgrounds, both heard the call to come and help here in the valley. After working in the medical field with Logan Health for a number of years, both discovered a shared interest in functional medicine and saw the potential of how a private practice could be beneficial to the Flathead. As of the time writing this article, their practice had only been open for a few months. But these two are already eager to offer high quality care for their patients and to spread awareness of the common blind spots in modern healthcare, and how functional medicine can help.



Brittany Coburn NP-C with her family from
L-R: Gabe, husband Tom, and Jake



Dr Tom Flass with his family - Photos by ACE Photography & Design

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When it comes to modern day medical structure, Coburn and Flass believe there's a lot left to be desired. They believe functional medicine can help smooth over the gap between patients and providers when looking for cures.

"With regular medicine," Coburn states, "You'll often come to somebody and listen to your story, give you a diagnosis, and give you a standard medical treatment to care for you. For example, if you come in with hypertension, traditional medicine will say 'oh that's bad for your body, we'll give you medication to bring it down.' Functional medicine will say, 'yes, your blood pressure is high, but why?' What is going on in the background of your body? So then we go and do a deep dive and come up with the root cause or reason why your blood pressure, your particular blood pressure, is high... it's (diagnosing) not a one size fits all approach."

Traditional medicine can also often be slowed down by other communal factors when new thoughts of treatment are brought up, whereas functional medicine is more willing to explore them.

"It's much more proactive medicine," says Flass. "Rather than waiting 20 years to implement new discoveries and letting however many patients be damaged in the meantime, functional medicine

embraces medical change as long as there's plausible evidence behind it. We don't wait 20 years for something to get accepted by standard western medicine. You and your family deserve better, so the time to act is now!"

As they grow, their goal is to incorporate other team members including nutritionists, health coaches and physical therapy for health and movement coaching and make sure there's a fully informed and well-rounded approach. Along with that they are working to create group medical visits, so that several patients with similar health conditions can learn functional medical solutions to take better care of themselves while also having private checkups with their providers later.

The group visit model can be extremely helpful for areas such as pregnancy education, menopause or hormonal issues or those at risk for heart disease and diabetes. For some folks this could be a more affordable way to get started on a healthier path without spending a large out of pocket sum. "It can be something that a patient can use to dip their toe in the water and see if functional medicine is right for them," says Flass. "It also benefits primary care providers who don't have the time to do the nutrition and lifestyle education. Primary care providers are getting shellacked because they're asked to do so much more in a 10-15 minute visit that is just not possible."

Functional Medicine Associates of Montana also have the ability to safely and legally order lab tests for reduced costs and discuss the results with the patients. Flass continued "Having personalized care, not just algorithms and having time to spend with each person is huge but unfortunately in the current medical system dictated by insurance and drug companies, most providers are getting pushed into giving shorter and shorter visits for complex problems and that's just not sustainable."

In hopes of combating this medical epidemic, Coburn and Flass plan to educate the public about the benefits of functional medicine and whole person healthcare. With the plans for the group classes, their new Podcast "The Aware Families Podcast," as well as the column, they believe in getting the word out and bringing it to the forefront of the conversation; to educate and show others that there are other options than just the standard route. That you are more than just a list of symptoms to fix.

While they understand this is a small step against the grain of a very large and malfunctioning system that's been active for decades, Coburn and Flass of Functional Medicine Associates of Montana know that their cause is worth the fight.

www.functionalmedassociates.com