

What's a Dentist to Do? Finding the Real Connection

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As dentists, we are trained to be efficient, to restore our patients to health with quality care in a timely manner. The focus is on getting procedures done and done well, and on performing those procedures effectively in the least amount of time. After all, time is money. Remember the DAU Clinic? Four-handed dentistry. The 45-minute crown preparation. We rebuild teeth with handpieces, burs, bonding materials, and timing. The focus is on action - but when we allow ourselves to see our cases as our patients, the practice of dentistry can teach us so much more.

We all want what's best for our patients. Toward that end, we often get caught up in being efficient and center-staging our technical competence. We usually are unaware of the effect this has on our patients.

Efficiency works with things but not with people. Have you ever tried to be efficient with your spouse over a disagreement? Have you ever tried being efficient with your son or daughter over a problem? And how did that go?

What improves the dentist/patient relationship more than anything else? Taking a digital radiograph without the need for it to be developed and fixed? No. Doing a 45-minute crown

preparation? No. It's training yourself in the art of getting to know your patient so you can think and feel as he or she thinks and feels. "If I were this individual patient, knowing what I know about dentistry, how would I want to be treated?" Well you may ask. That is empathy. Once achieved, it will convey itself to your patients automatically, without words, enriching both your experience and your patient's.

This empathy begins with the initial interview and continues as a process, building a bond of sorts.

Care for your patients knowing that their well-being contributes to your own. That type of genuine caring cannot be hidden from your patients and will lead to trust. Trust dissolves fear. This trusting relationship then becomes mutual and self-sustaining.

Empathy is "understanding another's heart, mind, and spirit - including their motives, backgrounds, and feelings." Empathy helps us appreciate our patients for who they are, and empathy gives our patients license to express their thoughts and feelings. This empathy not only better serves our patients but enriches our work.

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Please e-mail us at jackchurchill@msn.com or fax us at (612) 339-3618. We look forward to hearing from you not only regarding this article, but also if you have any ethical dilemmas you would like to present to the membership. Perhaps we can help you decide what to do.

vulnerable. But if we have integrity and are personally secure, that vulnerability is well worth the price in fuller, more meaningful relationships with our patients.

Eleanor Roosevelt wrote in *You Learn By Living*, "Approach each new person you meet in a spirit of adventure. Try to discover what he is thinking and feeling; to understand as far as you can the background from which he comes, the soil in which his roots have grown, the customs and beliefs and ideas which have shaped his thinking. If you care enough to make the effort, you can establish an understanding relationship with people who are entirely outside your own orbit."

Modest insight on how to project empathy in your practice will be presented in our next column.

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