

What's a Dentist to Do? Failure

It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled, or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes short again and again, who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause, who at best knows achievement and who at the worst if he fails at least fails while daring greatly so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

Theodore Roosevelt, from a speech given in Paris at the Sorbonne in 1910

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We are in the arena every day, not alone, but with another who is dreaded and feared yet is invaluable in ways that usually go unseen. His name is failure.

In dentistry, failure is generally viewed as shameful, certainly disappointing. Well, 30-plus years of practice gives a person a perspective that otherwise doesn't exist. Failure, though sour to the taste, is an asset, even a friend.

The book *What I Wish I Knew When I Was 20***, by Tina Seelig got me to thinking about the premise that it is from failure that we learn to walk by falling over and over again. From failing throughout childhood, we learn everything from doing algebra to catching a baseball. Why should we do otherwise as adults?

We learn from doing, from failing, and by recovering from those inevitable failures.

We cannot learn by reading, for example - we must do. In dentistry

we must do, do and fail, do and learn. Failures expand our knowledge, expand our skill base, and increase the chances that we won't make the same mistake again.

Any path to success is littered with failure. Basketball superstar Michael

Jordan describes his: I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life, and that is why I succeed.

Our careers in dentistry are fraught with taking the risk of doing things for the first time. Doing something for the first time either works or it doesn't. If it

works, bingo. If it doesn't, do we stay the course, or walk away? Do we persist, hoping for a break-through; make a correction? We often stay in dead-end situations way too long, or we may risk quitting on something way too early. So how do you know

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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.

when to make a change? Listen to your gut. Look at your options and define possible outcomes. Figure out the chances of each occurring and have a plan for each. Prepare for the downside and have a backup plan in place. Manage your risks by making decisions based upon the facts and the relevant science. Good decisions, of course, can still lead to bad outcomes. Have a Plan B to handle the inescapable failures. When dealing with these failures, consider the consequences for your patient and those around you. Failure will happen. You will not dodge every bullet, but you can recover quickly and learn from each. You only drive over a pothole so many times before you learn to avoid it.

Our careers are not a straight line but a wave. It has its ups and downs,

Continued on next page

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Ethics Committee

Continued from previous page

but the wave moves upward overall. When you are on the downward part of the wave, it's easy to get discouraged. That is when you need to remind yourself that you've just hit a little trough.

"Experience is simply the name we give our mistakes," said Oscar Wilde.

Failure that does not motivate to correction is bad. Becoming comfortable with our failures and/or not acting on them to improve our services hurts everyone, especially our patients.

We are all different when it comes to defining failure. It was defined for us by our upbringing, our training experience, and now our day-to-day practices. To some, failure is a crown that doesn't last five years. To others, that same crown needs to go 20 years. Is failure:

- a contact open the width of a piece of paper? Or more?
- a posterior composite in #18 with the color off half a shade? Or two?

- a root canal that is 1 mm past the apex? Even if sealed?
- a patient who is not happy with treatment even though you are?
- a patient who is happy with

treatment but you are not?

- a production number of less than \$60,000/month?
- a high staff turnover?
- not enough family time?

What is failure?

Map out your own definition between failure and success in regard to all aspects of the work of living, from the actual physical being through the outward facts of money, business, and managing those areas, to the realm of the emotions and the spirit, and don't forget to include service.

Failures teach. Why not keep some sort of record of your failures in your professional and personal life? This could help any one of us come to terms with and accept our mistakes, and could help us turn our errors into

positives by permanently making them learning moments. Keep professional and personal categories and add to them annually. Revisit them often. They are as much a part of you as are your successes.

Dentistry has always been and will always be about excellence, the pursuit of perfection. That is well and good as long as it is tempered with the firm realization that we often fall short. Be at peace with that.

Two final points:

Allow yourself to learn from others. You don't have to tackle every challenge from square one, and all by yourself.

If you do fail at something, it is not you who is the failure. You personally are not a failure. You did your best. You had the right idea. Your heart was in the right place. It just fell a little short. Your porcelain crown may have broken, your filling may have an overhang, your employee may be unhappy, your practice may have not done as well this year as last. But you are not your crown, you are not your filling, you are not your practice. You are you — imperfect and unashamedly you.

Manage your risks by making decisions based upon the facts and the relevant science.