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# What's a Dentist to Do? Joey Didn't Know

**Jack L. Churchill, D.D.S.\***

Joey was born with club feet. When he was born, the bottoms of his feet were twisted up onto his stomach. The doctors told Joey's parents he would eventually walk normally but would probably never run very well. By the time he was three, Joey had been through many surgeries, casts, and braces. He worked, he exercised, and by the age of eight he was walking normally.

Still, when walking long distances, Joey would have to stop several times along the way to rest because his legs would hurt. He wasn't told it was because of his club feet. So he didn't know.

The neighborhood kids would run and play so Joey would, of course, join in but could never keep up. But his parents never told him he was different. So he didn't know.

In seventh grade, Joey tried out for the cross country team. He sensed he wasn't a natural runner, so he worked harder than the others. His parents never told him to expect to always be in the back of the pack because of his deformity. They never told him to expect not to make the team. So he didn't know.

To make the team, he ran four to five miles per day, every day after school, never missing practices. One day he was sick, running a 103 degree fever. His parents fully expected a call from school to come and get Joey, but the call never came. Joey's mother drove to school to check on him. When she arrived, she spotted him

running along a street, all alone. She drove up alongside Joey and asked how he felt. "Okay," he said. His eyes were glassy from his fever, but he continued, finishing his four-mile run. His mother never told him he couldn't run four miles with a 103 degree fever. So he didn't know.

Two weeks later, those who made the cross country team were announced. The top seven runners make the team. Joey was #6. His parents never told him he shouldn't expect to make the team. They never told him he couldn't do it, so he didn't know. He just did it.\*\*

Joey never had any doubt he would make that team. I wish I could be like Joey; however, I am not.

Possibly like many of you, I am riddled with self-doubt. I believe I am an excellent dentist. I know I care deeply about my patients; however, that pesky feeling that I will fall short somehow always creeps in. Every morning before the workday, I pray that

my skills don't abandon me and that I remain worthy of the trust my patients and staff place in me, but that pesky self-doubt always sneaks in there.

Above and beyond the everyday self-doubt all people experience, I believe we dentists are at greater risk because we work in such a challenging profession. Our feelings of self-doubt are directly related to the height of our goals. Dentistry sets its goals very high (i.e., perfect margins in a very challenging field), and the fear of falling short of those goals can

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incite doubt. Self-assessment is the key factor here. The better you are at assessing your own work, the higher your risk of self-doubt. Lower self-assessment skills correlate with lower chances of doubting yourself. Thereby our self-doubt is often not a factor of our quality of work but our ability to self-examine.

Many of you know what I'm talking about here. The shade on the crown you just permanently seated is one-quarter shade off. Your proximal contact is a tad light. You correct the wholesale, way-off stuff. That's a given. It's the tads, the smidges, and the iotas that get you. That's what

*Continued on next page*

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\*\* Story paraphrased from **A Third Serving of Chicken Soup for the Soul** by Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, Health Communications Inc., Deerfield Beach, FL, copyright 1996, page 259: *We Never Told Him He Couldn't Do It*, by Kathy Lamancusa.

# Ethics Committee

*Continued from previous page*

we often bring home with us. That's overself-assessment at its best. Those smidges, those skoshes, and those titches are the bane of our existence. It's good to tend to details — just don't sweat them.

Keep in mind that dentistry does afford itself one luxury — mulligans. If you come up a little short, redo it - and then let it go.

I am simply acknowledging this phenomenon of self-doubt. I do not profess to know how to cope with it effectively, as you can see from my earlier admission. But dentists do sabotage themselves and do so with great effectiveness and most often without grounds. A patient leaves the practice, and what's the first question you ask? "What did I do?" That is self-doubt at its finest.

It is possible to include others

in your "self"-assessment. Consider bringing together a small group of peers to critique each other's work. Ask your specialists for feedback.

The process of today's evidence-based dentistry is an activity that not only improves service to our patients but heightens our confidence that we're doing the right things. How do you know you're competent? Seek and solicit answers. Any positive energy moving forward to improve ourselves and our patients overwhelms self-doubt.

Family and friends are, of course, important support groups for coping with your personal uncertainties. I remember how Peter was coaxed by Jesus to walk on water. He did so until he lost focus, doubted, and started to sink. Jesus pulled him to safety. You too can be helped by looking to Someone Greater.

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what you have  
achieved;  
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Self-acceptance is an ongoing process. Practice the following offerings and see what they can do to redirect your energies.

1. Don't indulge in self-criticism.
2. It's okay to choose to please yourself.
3. Don't try to be someone else.
4. Focus on your successes.
5. Use positive words.
6. Visualize positive images.
7. Focus on your strengths.
8. Do your best.
9. Feed your brain.
10. Surround yourself with positive people.
11. Don't be influenced by negative people.
12. Trust in yourself.
13. Serve others.
14. Understand that many things are beyond your control.
15. Appreciate that we all fall short.
6. Look to a Higher Power.

Don't be anxious over what you cannot or could not achieve. Take joy in what you have achieved; otherwise, your efforts are without meaning. Believe in and celebrate your abilities. Say to yourself, "Look what I did!"