

Prologue: Why Are You Telling Me All of This?

You're nice, you're competent, and you want to do a good job. What we're talking about here is something different.

We're sharing an outlook that helps you mentally unite all the elements required for exceptional patient care outcomes.

This approach will help you make the most of what is inside your control and manage what is outside your control—like the individual, situational feelings and needs (and twitchy tongues) of your patients.

To this end, this material will share concepts and mnemonics that allow you to

create at will a stable, dependable bridge between you and every patient you treat that allows each of you to know and agree on what is happening now, what to expect next, and to advise each other of your needs and expectations as they come to mind.

Some of it may seem elementary. Indeed, fundamentals mentioned here to explain why they work and incorporate them into the larger perspective. Hang in there, it all goes together. This isn't about teaching you new tricks as much as a new approach, purpose, perspective, and frame of mind.

Presence Keeps Things Calm

When we talk about an empathic connection, we're talking about connecting

with your patient on an individual human level so you can fully communicate with them, and get a sense of how they're feeling at all times. An empathic connection addresses and reduces anxiety and fear in both you and the patient. By focusing on what is happening now, creating a calm and predictable environment, creating a rhythm of seeking and responding to feedback, and building trust through setting specific expectations as you work, both the practitioner and the patient can focus, and give less mental energy to worries, expectations, and fears. We can both be "in the moment."

For the practitioner, being in the moment erases the performance anxiety of being onstage and makes us more physically coordinated, calmer, more caring and

confident clinicians. The patient is calmer, more comfortable and more cooperative. Anxiety moves blood away from the part of the brain that thinks complexly. An anxious patient can't fully engage their brain in learning about hygiene, or understanding their treatment options. A comfortable patient is able to stay in a rational frame of mind as they hear their treatment and homecare needs.

Instead of going into each treatment hoping to execute a particular image of a perfect performance of a clinical ideal that is almost always sidetracked by any number of exceptions, interruptions, and nonstandard conditions, a focus on the present allows us to actively assess and work with the person and situation in front of us as they are and as it is. This is how to

close the frustrating and less compassionate gap between what we've been specifically trained for and the needs of the person in front of us. We do this by focusing on the patient's comfort.

Focusing on Comfort

Comfort is also the only way patients can measure or rate their experience. They don't understand the situation beyond whether something was painful and unpleasant, or comfortable and easy. For this reason, it's the best point reference for the feedback loop we create with them. Because it requires us both to be in the moment, it's also the best goal to have in mind as we treat with presence. As a focal point for the practitioner, it's perfect because it requires us come up for air and connect with the patient regularly. We

avoid tunnel-visioning on the teeth and being passively inconsiderate.

Cultivating Patient Comfort is Needed Industry-Wide

Comfort is more than superficial. It's a worthy clinical outcome for both short- and long-term reasons. It is important to the patient's overall oral health as well as any direct impact of their opinion of you and your practice.

For the patient, encouraging presence helps them stay out of their imagination and in a comfortable frame of mind, well below the threshold of stress reactions. This is important. Why?

According to the ADA, 40% of insured patients don't seek non-emergency dental

care. Why would anyone avoid care they've already paid for? Fear and discomfort.

Fear and Discomfort as Clinical Factors

It doesn't require an injury to develop dental avoidance. Our stress reactions can take a merely uncomfortable situation and blow it up into a serious aversion. The sympathetic nervous system is activated by uncertainty and discomfort, which results in a more vigilant, reactive, sensitive state, which makes treatment more uncomfortable for them and more difficult for you. Further, stress and fear is more memorable than anything else, so these low-level negative experiences lead to surprisingly potent negative associations with you and the practice.

If this doesn't make sense, zoom out and

shift your concept of fear and comfort for a second. Go below the level of wide-eyed, sweating panic, and include in your concept all of the stress and annoyance feelings related to any situation beyond your control. Every patient is fearful or concerned about impacts to their comfort, money, and time, and the stress of making decisions they don't understand (The Four Fears). These fears, when combined with the discomforts inherent in hygiene and dental treatment, cannot be met with anything short of focused effort to compensate if patients are to leave the practice satisfied and happy to return—to your practice or anywhere else, as we have seen.

Hygiene appointments are the most frequent point of contact with the Dental

World. These visits must be seen by everyone in the practice as tourism into our world, where every impression the patient has is heightened and therefore important. We can do this and ensure great care outcomes by being present, creating an empathic connection, and using comfort as our goal and reference for feedback.

Cultivating your presence, emphasizing the empathic connection, and helping your patients do the same will improve the quality of care they receive, and allow something as invasive and potentially uncomfortable as scaling to be welcome and comfortable.

It will also make your job a lot more enjoyable, and help you connect to the larger purpose of the work you do.

What you do matters, and this approach keeps you and your patients in mind of that.

Happy Scaling!