

Uncomfortable Moments

Answering Patients' Difficult Questions

There's perhaps not a more exquisite moment of truth in our daily practice than when a patient asks us a direct—and sometimes difficult—question. The next breath, the slightest twitch of an eye, or the stumble of a word can determine whether that patient will ever trust you, refer others to you, or ultimately allow you to perform the dentistry that will benefit him or her. There's no place to hide, no one to answer the question for you, no changing the subject.

The ability to answer difficult questions with grace, sincerity, truthfulness, and even style eludes many dentists throughout their careers. Yet the ability to answer difficult questions is one of the main determinants of our success in caring for our patients. Let's explore some of the elements of answering questions.

Important principle No. 1: You don't really know the question!

Often we see dentists and their staffs practically jump out of their scrubs to answer a patient's question, when in reality they don't truly know what the patient is asking. We are so full of data and information that we are ready to spew answers without really hearing what the patient is asking.

Solution: Ask a question to better understand what the patient is asking.

Example: The patient asks, "Why do I need this crown?" The answer seems obvious, doesn't it? Simply tell the patient that the tooth is badly cracked and can't be restored without a crown. Wrong! How do you really know what the patient is asking? He or she could be seeking an answer to any number of questions, concerns, problems, issues, fears, misperceptions, or misunderstandings. Patients may ask why they need a crown because they think they need endodontic therapy first and may be puzzled about why you're not telling them about the need for root canal therapy. Or, patients may be concerned that getting a crown is a painful, long, and drawn-out procedure. The thing to remember is to ask a question before you begin answering a patient's question. You'll get to the patient's real concern much more quickly!

Important principle No. 2: Those who are asking the questions are in charge.

Instead of telling your patients what they *need* to do, what they *should* do, or any number of non-collaborating tactics, try asking a question. Asking questions is important for helping you connect with your patients; telling them what to do only creates distance and disconnects you.

Solution: Learn to ask good open-ended questions.

Example: Open-ended questions generally cannot be answered with a "yes" or "no." When a patient asks you a difficult question, respond by asking an open-ended question. In our previous example about the need for a crown, there are several appropriate questions you could ask in response. For example, ask, "What concerns do you have about this necessary treatment?" or, "How could I help you better understand your current situation?" Another possible question is, "It sounds like you have some concerns. What specific concerns do you have?" Asking open-ended questions helps patients connect to you, helps you to understand them better, helps them to understand the need for treatment, and reduces the possibility of a misunderstanding.

Important principle No. 3: Silence is powerful.

Sometimes silence is uncomfortable, but it allows



time for our brains—and our patients' brains—to process what has been spoken. Silence allows time for reflection, formulating the real question, or even answering our own questions.

Solution: Allow and welcome silence during your conversations with patients.

Example: Allowing even 10 seconds is enough time for patients to rephrase the question, ask a different question that clarifies their original question, or reflect on the preceding discussion you were having about their condition, which thereby answers their own question. If none of these occurs, you can ask the patient a question after allowing for silence. In general, most people find it very uncomfortable to sit in silence for very long. Of course, you're not trying to make your patients uncomfortable; you're merely trying to allow room for the question they're really trying to ask. If you jump in first because you can't stand silence any more than they can, you've missed your chance to better understand them.

Important principle No. 4: What you do is louder than anything you'll say.

Communication can be grouped into verbal and non-verbal actions. Fortunately, your non-verbal actions can be a bigger ally to you than words over which you may fumble when trying to answer a question. Conversely, your lack of attention to the non-verbal components of your communication—crossed arms, yawning, closed eyes, lack of eye contact—can negate your verbal skills, however exceptional they may be.

Solution: Be acutely aware of your posture, your attention, and especially where your eyes are focused.

Example: When a patient asks you a difficult question, don't penalize yourself by being inattentive to the non-verbal components of the communication process. Your audience—your patient—is paying attention to every detail of what you're saying and doing, and a slip can negatively impact the trust you're developing with your patient. When your patient asks, "Why do I need a crown?" and you stare at a radiograph and reply, "Because your tooth is severely decayed and can't be restored with a filling," your patient probably will not choose to receive treatment from you, even though the treatment may be warranted under every possible scenario. Make sure you look at the patient, sit or stand in a neutral position, and cease all activity that isn't focused on the patient. Connection and understanding can occur much more quickly and your communication will be more effective when you take all of these elements into consideration.

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Important principle No. 5: Don't answer a question to which you don't know the answer.

We all are going to be faced with questions to which we don't know the answers, so why pretend to know it all? People usually can tell when you're giving a vague answer to their question. And if you're making up the answer as you're going along, your patients will not trust you. Don't allow your ego to get in the way.

Solution: Be honest, upfront, and humble when answering a patient's question.

Example: None of us knows all of the answers, and everyone dislikes someone trying to "pull a fast one" on them. It's very difficult to acknowledge to your patients that you don't know the answer to a question when you've been trained to provide these answers. Your patients are coming to you because you are the expert. When you're asked a difficult question, it's best not to bluff your way through it; instead, acknowledge that you may need to study or seek more information to answer the question, and you will contact the patient quickly when you find the answer. Or, refer the patient to a specialist if the situation warrants it. Remember, your patient's best interest should be paramount—not your ego, your fear of losing the patient, or the fear of not getting the opportunity to provide treatment.

There is no single way to answer a difficult question, but the confidence and trust needed to provide the care that your patients deserve can be dashed with communication blunders. Instead of scripted answers, apply these principles when answering difficult questions, and enjoy the benefits that higher trust and clearer communication can bring you and your patients. ♦



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