

CHALLENGING PATIENT INTERACTIONS:



Every Dental practice has them: challenging patients. They're the ones who try your patience, push your buttons, and test your reserves of goodwill.

A June 2018 Dental Protection survey of members in South Africa found that 50% of dentists are experiencing more demanding patients with higher expectations. Over 80% agreed or strongly agreed that patient expectations have increased in the last five years. Unsurprisingly, this correlates with the increasing number of complaints to the HPCSA and SADA.

Patients can be challenging for a variety of reasons. Even your best patients probably don't look forward to sitting in the dental chair. When patients are uncomfortable, vulnerable or in pain from dental problems, their tempers are more likely to flare. Some are angry and/or resistant to recommended treatment because they are in denial about the state of their dental health, others might have a genuine fear of dentists. One study found nearly 60% of patients are anxious about seeing a dentist; some even have full-on dental phobia. Patients age 24 and older are more likely to fear the dentist because they're more likely to have experienced painful dental procedures in the past. It's all a recipe for rage.

Dealing with patients who are unreasonable, aggressive, and demanding can be distressing. Bruce Peltier, PhD, MBA, professor of psychology and ethics at the University of the Pacific School of Dentistry in San Francisco, prefers to focus not on difficult patients but difficult situations. Difficult interactions are part of the job in a dental office, here are some pointers on how to best deal with them.

AVOID PRECONCEPTIONS

Do you ever scan through the names on your schedule for the day and one of them triggers a light headache? You know that patient is challenging, and you immediately form an assessment as to how difficult the forthcoming encounter will be. Thus, you have already labelled the patient as 'difficult' due to their behaviour at a previous appointment.

Once you have made this assessment, it becomes easy to stereotype a patient and make assumptions about them. Our perception can then affect our greetings, body language, listening skills and the information we provide. The interaction between healthcare professional and patient is a dynamic, two-way relationship based on trust and cooperation. Because both parties respond to each other's behaviours, you can minimize the likelihood that you will find a specific patient difficult by modifying your own behaviour.

ACKNOWLEDGE

If a patient is dissatisfied or disappointed about the care they have received, it is important to acknowledge the unexpected outcome. Try to summarise and gain agreement about what the key issues are.

Some patients won't speak up about their frustrations initially. You can train yourself to pick up early warning signs such as grunting, clenched fists, heavy sighs, a raised voice or eye rolls. If you spot these red flags, be proactive and give the patient some extra attention to find out what the problem is.

LISTEN

Allow a patient to speak their minds in full without interruption. Focus on listening to the patient and fully hearing the reason for their anger. Let them feel that their opinion is heard and valued by keeping eye contact and open body language. A challenging patient can often calm themselves down by talking through what they're feeling. It gives them a chance to work through the frustration and to pull themselves together.

ASK QUESTIONS

Ask the patient questions about his/her frustrations. E.g. "Were you having this problem before?" or "How do you think I could have handled it?" will give you the understanding you need to frame your response in a way that doesn't further upset them. Probing may reveal tooth pain, discomfort, concerns about costs, or just a bad day in general that caused a loss of control. Some of these factors can easily be addressed if you know about them.

BE UNDERSTANDING AND SHOW EMPATHY

Show compassion and demonstrate that you understand why the patient is disgruntled. Making a patient feel that you care, is a good way to calm an upset patient and alleviate a tense situation. Also, empathy can go a long way with patients who have had bad experiences in the past, many of who are fearful and distrustful.

REMAIN CALM AND PROFESSIONAL

Dealing with a challenging patient takes care, judgement and self-control. Do not raise your voice or be sarcastic. Most problems can be handled accordingly and can be solved without yelling and unnecessary comments. Nobody wants to be spoken down to or spoken to in a nasty tone, so keep your voice at a normal volume, speak slowly but firmly, and get straight to the point. Certain things can escalate situations, such as hand movements, pacing, or even just talking the wrong way.

STICK TO FACTS

Speak calmly to each of the patients' points of frustration with facts. For example, if the patient's dissatisfaction stems from an admin or financial source, respond to them with physical proof. Financial concerns are the biggest trigger that can set patients off. Being able to clearly explain what the charges are related to and how the amount charged was determined may diffuse a difficult interaction. The goal is to simply get them to a point where they understand that you are not the cause of their anger, even if it that's how it originally felt. You're there to help.

BOUNDARIES

Maintain firm boundaries and avoid being drawn into discussions that are not focussed on solutions. Often, finding common ground can stop any further deterioration in the interaction.

BE FLEXIBLE IN YOUR APPROACH

Not every patient is the same. The key to handling a difficult situation is a flexibility of approach.

APOLOGISE WHEN NECESSARY

Offer an apology if one is necessary and make sure the patient can see you're sincere. An apology can go a long way toward easing patient frustration or resolving a complaint. Contrary to popular belief, apologies tend to prevent formal complaints rather than cause them. An apology can provide reassurance to a patient and is often all the patient is looking for.

INVOLVE THE PATIENT IN THE SOLUTION

Depending on the situation, you may want to ask the patient what he or she thinks is a good solution to the problem. If this isn't possible, try presenting the patient with two options to choose from. If patients feel they have some control over the outcomes, they'll be more satisfied with the results.

CHECK YOURSELF

Patients are not always the source of a difficult encounter. Practice staff should reflect on how their attitudes, moods, or stress levels may trigger a bad patient interaction. Don't underestimate the positive difference that good interpersonal skills can have on a situation. It can be easy to lose your temper when a patient is being argumentative but engaging in conflict is never a good idea. A calm, reassuring tone can sometimes alleviate a tense situation.

EMPOWER YOURSELF

High maintenance patients can be a drain on everyone in the practice. You can set up practice guidelines on how to handle difficult patients to reduce undue stress. Once everyone in the dental practice understands how to keep a patient satisfied, both the staff and patients will be happier. Additionally, you can sharpen up on your customer service skills by browsing the Internet for articles or talking to other professionals. Sharing successful approaches with colleagues and exploring resources in advance helps to prepare the dental team to work effectively with patients in these situations.

CONSULT YOUR MANAGER

When you can no longer handle a situation or find yourself getting upset and angry, it's best to call a manager or colleague to help you with the patient. Bringing in a fresh pair of ears and eyes can have a great impact on the resolution of a problem. Bringing in a supervisor or other higher-up to listen to the issue may also help them feel important.

KEEP RECORD

If a situation escalates to the point where you fear a complaint or other action, be sure to take detailed notes after the episode for your records. Get input from other office staff to back up your recall of events.

SET LIMITS

It's important to protect the dignity and physical safety of staff and other patients in the office. If at any point a patient displays violence to anyone in the practice or are threatening to the point where there are fears for personal safety, the incident should be promptly reported to law enforcement.

TERMINATE TREATMENT

The decision to stop treating a patient lies only with the Dentist. Such a decision must be fair and should be an absolute last resort. You can help by keeping record of the events that led to the decision, including any efforts to warn the patient about their behaviour.



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR YOU TO MANAGE DIFFICULT SITUATIONS WELL?

Return business is crucial for any Dental practise because of the costs related to attracting new patients versus keeping existing ones. It is therefore important to ensure that even the most challenging customers return to your practice. Word of mouth is known to be a powerful marketing tool, and according to Peltier, unhappy patients will find a way to communicate their negative feelings even if no one is listening. You have a key role in maintaining the good reputation of the practice by avoiding possible bad reviews and handling difficult situations in a way that will keep patients coming back to the practice for years to come.

Sometimes managing a challenging patient can be a much bigger task than the actual treatment itself. Ignoring an unhappy patient may result in you losing control of the situation and could result in the patient complaining to the HPCSA or even bringing a claim against your Dentist.

In South Africa, the level of litigation and HPCSA involvement is ever increasing which makes it important to have an effective complaints procedure within the Dental practise, and to make sure that your patients are aware that their concerns can be fully addressed.

Patients are less likely to escalate complaints to the HPCSA when they are aware that an informal, operative resolution system is available to them, and when they have confidence that their complaint will be taken seriously and resolved efficiently. Many dissatisfied patients do not complain at all. They simply leave and go elsewhere, which is not good for business.

Because you have direct contact with the patient, you have a key role in early identification of a dissatisfied patient and by using some of the tips and tricks above, might be able to stop a complaint.

You can further add value to the dental practice by implementing a proactive approach to managing complaints. Invite patients to let you know if they are not happy with any aspect of the care, treatment or service they have received. Comment or feedback cards are just some ideas. This way you can also collect positive feedback.

You may want to call patients who complained back on a quiet afternoon to provide feedback or respond to the complaint after investigating the matter. Even if the patient is not completely satisfied with the outcome, it provides a further opportunity to identify a complaint and deal with dissatisfaction at an early stage. It also demonstrates care and consideration.



CONCLUSION

Your role in handling difficult situations the dental practice is undeniable. The way you engage with challenging patients can make or break the practice.

POINTS TO PONDER

What is the definition of a difficult patient to you?

If you were to think about your patients and define the 5 most “difficult”, who would they be? And why? Are they difficult because they argue about fees? Difficult because they cancel or no show all the time? Difficult because they say things that are inappropriate? Or difficult because they don’t accept recommended treatment?

How well have you managed difficult interactions in the past? How can you improve?

Are you adding value to the dental practice in the way you deal with challenging customers? Have you ever caused a patient to not return because of the way you handled a difficult situation?

When last did you read about or discuss with a peer, ways to manage challenging patients better? Do you have guidelines on how to manage difficult situations in the practice? If not, could you offer to create one?



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QUESTIONS

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