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Patient Motivation is Key

Dear Readers:

Interdisciplinary dentistry requires patients to invest a significant amount of time, energy, and money. A high level of motivation is necessary for a patient to begin and follow through what could be several years of treatment. As with anything we are moved to accomplish, this requires that the patient have a very clear image in their minds of the treatment outcome and its benefits to them in order to experience the desire we call motivation.

Over the more than 20 years of practicing in an interdisciplinary group, I have found that creating and maintaining patient motivation is a four-part process. Part One consists of helping the patient to clearly see their current dental condition or problem. Often, unless the patient is bothered by the appearance of their teeth or has discomfort, this can be the biggest challenge. For me, intraoral photographs are my most commonly used tool to accomplish Part One. A great option is to have a staff member make several photos and print them before the initial or recall exam. The staff member then gives them to the patient to review before the actual exam. This is a powerful method of getting patients to see their existing dental condition. For patients who come in with a specific complaint, Part One is relatively easy unless they have several other problems of which they are unaware.

Once Part One is accomplished, it is time to move on to Part Two. This is the time to tell your patient what you predict will happen if they do nothing to treat their problem. Note that this is not discussing treatment but, rather, is it very specifically describing what you believe will occur if they do nothing. This step is critical because motivation or desire is developed by comparing what will occur if no treatment is done in comparison to the benefits to be gained by choosing to go through treatment.

Part Three, then, is to describe the benefits of treatment. This is still different than describing the treatment itself. As dentists we are notorious for describing in detail what treatment we want to perform. But motivation doesn't come from knowing how you are going to perform the treatment; it comes from the patient knowing what they will get from the treatment.

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Again, photographs play a big role; specifically, before-and-after pictures of patients who had similar problems can be very helpful in getting patients to see a clear image of the benefits of treatment. In addition, I have on occasion had patients speak by telephone or meet patients who have been treated to get a first-hand account of the benefits and experience of certain treatments. Motivation to go through with treatment will either be present or not by the end of Part Three. That is, if the patient sees the value in the benefits of treatment vs their current condition, they will be interested in knowing about Part Four. If they don't value the benefits, nothing else you can say will likely have much impact.

Part Four, then, is to discuss the actual treatment options. It is at this time that the actual treatment plan is chosen. It is critical to not present the plan before this because you will be presenting to an unmotivated patient who will not understand the benefits of treatment or the risks of no treatment.

Our group has found that following these four steps has proven highly effective in getting patients to commit to interdisciplinary care. It is this commitment to the intended outcome that helps patients stay motivated throughout the course of treatment. We have also found it very helpful to create a sequence and timetable of appointments and therapists that the patient as well as everyone involved in their treatment can keep. This way, everyone can monitor the patient's progress from beginning to end and reinforce the final vision at each step along the way. Following this process has allowed our group to help get patients to commit to starting the interdisciplinary process, and reinforcing the vision of benefits at each stage of treatment has allowed us to help the patient sustain their motivation throughout the course of treatment.

Sincerely,

Frank M. Spear, DDS, MSD

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