

The Times They Are A-Changin’

by

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“The times they are a-changin’”. These famous words written by Bob Dylan in the 1960’s are an understatement when looking at the impact of today’s COVID-19 pandemic.

Well, times have changed! Our lives have changed at almost every level, including the practice of dentistry and its very future. Initially, we did not know exactly how to proceed. However, we are beginning to obtain information on the state of dentistry in the Fall of 2020 with potential solutions on navigating our practices into the future.

In March and April 2020, dentistry in the Covid-19 era was dealing with issues ranging from limited income through treating emergencies only, unemployment of staff and lab technicians to the ever-pending office overhead, student loans, and other loans. Measuring patient temperatures, waiting areas transferred to the patient’s cars, thorough history taking of exposure risk factors, and enhanced PPEs became the norm.

We saw a declining and unstable stock market which only exacerbated the uncertainty of the future. Increased tensions amongst family members, educating our children online at home, job losses and uncertainty became real issues that led to more stress and burnout. Stress that is unaddressed can make one develop irrational thoughts, causing our emotions to become unmanageable while acting in a self-defeating matter. Increased alcohol and drug use often times were sought to relieve the stress and anxiety associated with the moment. Navigating through the COVID-19 pandemic became a fearful journey into the future for many.

In early June 2020, the Health Policy Institute (HPI) of the American Dental Association reported that polling shows a “robust, sustained rebound in dental care” as practices started to re-open. By the Fall of 2020, the HPI released data evaluating personal and professional issues the dental community has been dealing with during the pandemic (www.ada.org/hpi):

At the beginning of September 2020:

- Nearly 98.8% of dental practices in the U.S. were open.

- Almost 48.3% of practices report “open and business as usual” in terms of patient volume.
- Private practice volume is estimated at about 75% of pre-COVID-19 levels.
- 95.9% of dentists are paying their staff.
- Most common reactions to the enhanced PPEs:
 - a. General discomfort, b. Heat stress,
 - c. Exhaustion, d. Headaches
- Downward trend in reported reactions associated with enhanced PPE use with increased age.
- Practice challenges (most common):
 - a. Planning for the future, b. Obtaining PPEs and supplies,
 - c. Financial sustainability, d. Concerns of health
- Personal challenges (most common):
 - a. Anxiety, b. Financial problems, c. Decreased quality of sleep

By late-September, some of these numbers were trending downward due to the fear and reality of what is being called the “Big Dip”, where hygiene schedules are less booked and take a big downward trend in mid-September through mid-November 2020. This is due to the lack of 6 month hygiene appointment scheduling while offices were closed from mid-March to mid-May, 2020, resulting in potentially decreased production.

Dentistry is also dealing with a lack of available dental hygiene workforce in some areas of the country. This has led to more innovative dental hygiene delivery systems, including utilizing a certified dental assistant who can do coronal polishing (if state dental laws allow) so that dental hygienists can concentrate on scaling and root planning. If implemented, caution is advised during Covid-19 to prevent extreme workloads on the dental hygienist, since ultrasonics are currently not recommended for use due to aerosolized droplets. Beware if wrist or potential carpal tunnel-like symptoms develop with the dental hygienists plus emotional exhaustion.

Anytime there is change, we have the opportunity to grow and flourish or we can stagnate. Moving forward towards the beginning of 2021, we have the opportunity for practice and personal growth in several crucial areas:

Define your practice. Re-evaluate and re-define who you are, your goals and what direction your practice will take in the near and distant future. Evaluate the efficiency of the office and clinical systems. Plan and change them incrementally for success and ask for help from others.

Develop leadership skills. There has never been a better time to become a leader in your life and practice than right now. It is important to remember that most leaders are made, not born. Two of my favorite sayings come from author John C. Maxwell where he states, “People buy into the leader before they buy into the vision”, and “Leaders must be close enough to others, but far enough ahead to motivate them.” Surround yourself with information and people who can guide you through challenges and unknown times. It is often stated, “It is lonely at the top”. I think the previous statement is false because real leaders surround themselves with people and information that can direct them to make the best decision. There is wisdom in numbers. Discuss with your dental colleagues, experts, and advisors how you can make the best decisions in life and practice.

Set and renew boundaries. Boundary setting may sound harsh to do in certain situations, but it serves two very important purposes to free you to be more productive. First, boundaries define what you are willing to accept or allow in your life or practice. Secondly, the other person knows exactly what is expected of him in the relationship. Boundaries can actually help reduce stress and anxiety in your life.

Remain engaged and seek your passion. Engagement is the key to preventing stress and burnout. Pursue your passion or passions in life. They have a way of revitalizing your life. Passion changes everything!

Control your schedule. This is something in which we can have a say-so! Studies have shown that one of the biggest stressors in dental practices is running behind schedule with your dental appointments, even more so than dealing with difficult or demanding patients! Block scheduling is an excellent way to maximize production and stay on schedule, while potentially reducing stress (physical and mental).

Minimize debt. Don't do anything rash with money or make questionable investments now. Take steps that will set you up for success in the long run. Don't react but carefully proceed with input from the experts.

Don't isolate. Isolation can be a disturbing sign of illness. Some people are “loners” and live a balanced life. They are not who I'm referring to. If you notice you are starting to withdraw from functions, work, life, etc., you may be displaying signs of disease or illness. Physical isolation, while necessary during this pandemic, gives you the opportunity to reach out to colleagues, friends or family

via a telephone call, Skype, Zoom, Face Time, etc. This is an excellent way to share information and concerns while helping you to “keep your sanity”. Journal and then share your thoughts with trusted friends to explore how they may respond.

Contact your collegial community. All human beings have a need for *acceptance* (the need to belong) and *recognition* (the need to matter). Reaching out to fellow dentists in our dental community is crucial during this time. They are dealing with a lot of the same issues you are and sharing ideas may be beneficial for everyone. Allowing your employees to ask you questions and keeping your staff informed of the current status of your office during this pandemic can be a comfort to your employees. Hold morning huddles each day to plan the team approach to patient care. Conduct regular staff meetings to educate and evaluate the direction the practice is headed. Communicating with your staff shows that you *recognize* them as a vital part of the solution to maintain and grow your practice. Valuing their response indicates that you have *acceptance* for their ideas. The solution in going forward is found in the dental community and our teams.

(The views expressed in this article are not intended to be used as advice for the reader, but express what has been effective in the life of the author.)