

Knowing the Thing Behind the Thing



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THIS MONTH (AND BY THIS

MONTH, I mean March...I now realize that editors live in a world that's two months ahead), I had the opportunity to hear author Nadia Bolz Weber speak in Ashland. She talked a lot about compassion. She explained it as seeing "the thing behind the thing," understanding the motivation, intention, or fear driving someone's action. This can play out in many aspects of our lives...my mind, though, went directly to dentistry.

A patient sits down in the chair saying that they have not been to the dentist in 10 years. As I look at their radiographs, I see rampant decay and heavy calculus build-up. My immediate reaction is to assume they don't care about their oral health. The thing behind the thing, though, may be that they have struggled with substance abuse, depression, and social anxiety for years and they are now ready to reclaim their oral health. Now, arriving at the dentist was an act of bravery and commitment.

A team member forgets to send out a lab case, and I don't realize it until a morning huddle two weeks later when the patient is scheduled and their crown isn't back. My immediate reaction is anger and disappointment.

The thing behind the thing, though, may be my team member's perception that I expect perfection, and her fear about admitting to having made a mistake. If I could have proactively made my team a place where we value growth and communication over perfection, we could have prevented the conundrum.

Thinking about the thing behind the thing shifts our work to be able to make room for the messy human-ness of our profession. We treat humans. We employ humans. We rely on humans. Humans are complicated. Compassion allows us to appreciate and navigate that complexity. What would a little extra compassion look like in your day?

This is much easier said than done, of course, and choosing compassion everyday can get to be too much. It is not uncommon for dentists and other health care professionals to experience compassion fatigue, which is defined as "the cumulative physical, emotional and psychological effect of exposure to traumatic stories or events when working in a helping capacity, combined with the strain and stress of everyday life."¹ Symptoms include feeling overwhelmed or tired, becoming pessimistic and irritable, questioning your professional competence, and emotionally detaching personally and professionally.¹ I have already experienced some of these symptoms in my short career.

But here's the thing. We're better dentists — I believe — when we are compassionate dentists. How do we prevent ourselves and our colleges from getting fatigued, and how do we address it when it happens? Here are four strategies that help me:

- **Identify boundaries.** As a human, I can listen to and empathize with my patients. As a dentist, though, I have more limited abilities (restoring teeth, mostly). It helps to clearly communicate what I have control over.
- **Connect with colleagues.** Sharing difficult days with coworkers and friends helps me to decompress and remember that I have a support system.
- **Journal.** When I am not comfortable sharing, I find it helpful to write or type out my experience and identify the emotions I am feeling. This allows me to sit with the emotions and work through them instead of letting them fester.
- **Ask for help.** This may mean a dental specialist, a physician, a social worker, or another professional. I'll say it again — humans are complicated. We need a whole team to best care for each individual, and it's honorable to acknowledge that the best way we can care for our patients is often by asking for help. Finally, if you need support or know that a colleague does, please reach out to one of the ODA's Wellness Ambassadors so that they can connect you with resources. If you don't know who our Wellness Ambassadors are, you can email info@oregondental.org. We can and we should care deeply for others while caring deeply for ourselves. 🌱

Reference

1. American Bar Association. "Compassion Fatigue." Accessed 25 March 2019. https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/resources/compassion_fatigue