

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 1960s are an understatement when looking at the impact of today's COVID-19 pandemic. Our lives have been disrupted at almost every level, including the practice of dentistry and its very future. Exactly how we proceed from this point is unknown; but one thing is certain, we will go forward one way or another.

The lists of issues that dentists are dealing with at this time are unprecedented. They include:

- Unemployment of staff, dental lab technician and self
- Student loan debts
- Limited income through emergencies
- Job losses nationwide in the millions
- Declining and unstable stock market
- Increased drug use (opioids, alcohol, etc.)
- Addictions
- Family tensions and public education halted at all levels or gone online
- Stress and burnout

We have so much information about how to avoid COVID-19, but very little resources specific to how to take care of ourselves as dentists. Often times when we get stressed without reaching out for help, we develop irrational thoughts, our emotions become unmanageable and we act in a self-defeating matter. One way this happens is drinking too much when under stress. Often times a social drink turns into "necessary drink" due to stressful circumstances. Not being able to control unreasonable people, social media reviews, exacting or demanding patients and other people's beliefs, work or promises can be stressful at times. *We must realize that there is "freedom" in not being in control.* Our best efforts at control often times wouldn't change much anyway. Instead, we need to focus on what we can control within reason. Examples include re-defining our practices, exercising, working on our spiritual life, diet, down time, rest, recreation and sleep.

Long term solutions to these issues are just that, long term. However, what can we do in the immediate future that may help to mitigate some of these issues? The following are things that have worked for me and give me chances to reflect and evaluate my world when I'm under stress.

Immediate Ideas and Actions You Can Take During the COVID-19 Pandemic To Reduce Stress

- ***Define your practice.*** Take this time to 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.
- ***Set and renew boundaries.***
- ***Quit tolerating things that don't work.***
- ***Help others by giving back.*** Altruism always goes a long way to create lasting relationships and community. Donate to a cause, feed those less fortunate, check on a friend after trauma or surgery, etc.
- ***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 re-vitalizing your life!
- ***Control your schedule.*** This is something in which we can have a say-so! Take time now to develop a plan on how your office will handle the potential barrage of patients needing treatment once we are back full time. Why is this important? Studies have shown that one of the biggest stressors in dental practices is running behind schedule with your dental appointments. This can place a tremendous burden not only on the dentist but also the staff. Plan ahead in order to handle this potential situation.
- ***Minimize debt.*** Don't do anything rash with money or make questionable investments now. Don't take steps that won't set you up for success or be detrimental to you in the long run. Don't react but carefully proceed with input from the experts and others.
- ***Don't isolate.*** Isolation can be a disturbing sign of illness. Some people are "loners" and live a balanced life. That's not what 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, is not what I'm referring to. Reaching out to others such as colleagues, friends or family via a telephone call, Skype, Zoom, Face Time, etc., 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.

- ***Be in contact with 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. In addition, keep your staff informed of the current status of your office during this pandemic, while unknown, can be a comfort to your employees. Contacting your staff shows you *recognize* them as a vital part of the solution to maintain and restore your practice. Valuing their response indicates you have *acceptance* for their ideas. The solution is found in the community, especially the dental community. WE is stronger than me!

- ***Take care of your family and self.*** I find the following ideas and suggestions helpful for re-evaluating and re-engaging during difficult times.
 - Pray and meditate
 - Exercise, walk your dog, watch movies with family and friends
 - Take continuing education online to further your career and personal life
 - Grow through personal and spiritual development
 - Quit tolerating things that don't work
 - Evaluate old habits and eliminate those that are destructive
 - Incorporate new habits that focus on well-being
 - Sleep 6-8 hours daily
 - Engage by leaning into new things and activities
 - Communicate with others effectively
 - Invigorate your passion and remain curious about life
 - Don't isolate, get involved with life and ideas that set you up for success

- ***Focus on your spiritual life and be grateful.*** Pray and meditate to invite peace, comfort and direction for your life and future. Keep the faith and remember the solution to this time is found in our prayers and faith while staying in touch with our families virtually during this pandemic.

3 Great Resources for Dealing with Stress Issues

1. North Carolina Caring Dental Professionals

www.nccaringdental.com

The North Carolina Caring Dental Professionals is an independent, non-profit agency whose mission is to identify, intervene and assist members of the dental profession and their families who suffer the consequences of alcohol or other drug abuse, addiction, stress, professional burnout or other impairments.

Call 800-230-3934 with questions, concerns and help.

2. **American Dental Association**

[www.success.ada.org/Wellness/Work-Life Balance](http://www.success.ada.org/Wellness/Work-Life%20Balance)
Office: 312-440-2500

Great resources for stress, anxiety, burnout, depression and addiction.

3. **KevinMD.com**

www.kevinmd.com

Excellent resources for current commentary on stress from the medical community, especially surrounding the current pandemic. It is a great place to read dialogue amongst the medical community as they navigate through stress in their profession. I glean a lot from this website and it makes me think about how it may apply to dentistry.

In closing, 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." I am confident that the N.C. dentists will be up to the challenge in these uncertain times to become leaders by displaying principles, ethics, honesty and integrity. We need to be like thermostats, setting a path with guidance; instead of, being like thermometers, where we are reactive up and down without direction.

(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.)