



Empathetic dentistry



Dental therapist
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explains how

understanding our patients' personal situation can help us make breakthroughs with their oral health.

With prevention being the foundation of oral health, understanding our patients' personal situation, socio-economic background and oral health history can be a key factor in supporting them with their preventative routines and go some way towards reducing barriers to dental health visits.

Being empathetic does not (always) mean feeling sorry for somebody – the literal definition is to 'feel with' another person ie feeling the feelings they are feeling. But we can go further with our understanding of empathy and split it into three defined types of empathy.

1. Emotional empathy Quite literally feeling somebody's feelings – crying with them, laughing with them... In small doses and at the right time this can bring you closer to your patient but, quite often in the dental setting, it would be considered overstepping

the mark slightly.

2. Compassionate empathy Most people's understanding of empathy is the compassionate type. Not just feeling concern for a person's emotions, but also moving to do something about it.

3. Cognitive empathy This is the main focus when you are asking your patients about their lives, circumstances and dental concerns. It is the practice of understanding where they are coming from, without necessarily being emotionally connected or taking the same view as they are.

Applying this cognitive empathy to our day to day dental practice routines, and encouraging the team to use empathy in joined-up thinking about dental care for our patients, can greatly improve the service provision from the patient's perspective.

A good example is that of a stressed new parent. If you understand that this person may not be sleeping all night, has to follow a routine that works for their child (which likely



point while all the time considering how this patient's answers could be impacting on their oral health. Building a picture of your patient means you can treat them holistically and with compassion.

By showing an understanding from their patients' perspective, clinicians may find they connect with their patients on a personal level, and this could encourage them to be more receptive to advice. By cognitively empathising with patients' social and

sure I don't suggest they see the dentist who only works on that day. However, I also take into consideration the patient's career, family commitments and personal beliefs. School teachers are offered appointments in school holidays if they prefer, chefs are offered diet advice which relates to their work and religious holidays are taken into consideration when it may affect a patient's ability to observe their beliefs.

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economic stand point, clinicians can tailor the oral health advice to roughly fall into a patient's current routine. This often poses less resistance because it is less of a change in their already very busy schedule.

The empathetic approach can work throughout the patient journey. If your team are trained to have an awareness of patients' needs - such as to be seen on particular days, or if they can only make early morning appointments - they can then build a profile of the patient and with this knowledge better serve them.

For this reason, I make a point of handing over my patients to the next dental professional to see them (where possible). I'll ensure the dentist knows when my patient has a holiday booked, or a wedding to attend. They will also be made aware of any anxiety and reasons for that patient's fear - it is usually easier for the dentist to avoid unduly stressing the patient when they understand what it is that has concerned the patient in the past.

With direct access patients I will find out what my patient needs in order to make coming to the dentist easier. The most basic example of this would be when my patient cannot come in on a certain day, I'll make

empathetic approach is that it doesn't have to take time - it can be actions as little as noticing somebody got caught in the rain while getting to you and offering to hang their coat near the radiator. Small gestures often help to build a much more meaningful relationship between you and your patient. The patient may become more open to chatting with you about their problems if you have demonstrated your caring and empathetic nature. These friendly conversations will also often give you a better insight into the patient's home lives and pressures. Their career, lifestyle and family will all be factors in how they manage their oral health.

These small gestures, whilst not seeming to directly relate to the provision of dental care, do build an empathetic relationship with patients, who appreciate the care they receive. Patients who feel like they are understood are happier to return regularly and more likely to engage in preventative measures and treatment plans.

changes on a regular basis), they are generally quite exhausted, even overwhelmed and their oral health may not be at the top of their list of priorities.

Dental professionals could consider tailoring their oral hygiene advice to fit this person a little more. They may not experience 'morning and night' in the same way as somebody living alone and working a 9-5 job. They may need to be asked to try adjusting their oral health routine to fit in with their new home life.

In the case of the new parent this could mean linking flossing with the baby's bath time rather than insisting on the last thing at night as quite possibly the patient will be feeling too tired by then.

To build an empathetic relationship it is helpful to ask a number of open ended questions. This could be as simple as asking how has your day been? What is your job? How does your morning routine look? And continuing the conversation from this starting

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