

The Smile Behind The Mask

For many years now, we on the clinical side of dentistry have consistently worn masks only during procedures. With COVID-19, everyone in the office is now wearing a mask... all day long. Many (or most) are using N95 masks or double masking. Without the ability to use our 'total face' to express what we are saying, everyone faces an additional hurdle in communicating with our patients.

The Smile Behind the Mask can be seen if we are, indeed, actually smiling behind the mask. Our emotions and smile can actually reach our eyes. Our patients can hear/'see' the smile or caring concern in our voices.

Many years ago, Linda Miles (my dental consultant of 30 years and now a dear friend) would constantly say 'smile when you speak on the phone and the patient will feel the smile that they cannot see.' My business team began to smile during their phone calls, and the difference in communication was extremely well received by patients. Also, the entire clinical team began to smile behind their masks with a similar reaction by patients. With the doctor and team's smiles, patients could feel the care and sincere concern more than ever before. Many of you have heard of the four personality styles. Linda taught us over 30 years ago that our personality style is what it is. It is not wrong nor right. It just is. But what we CAN do is to shift our own method of communication to match the style of the patient.

I have practiced this personality shift when necessary for many years with great results, as have my team members and offices where I have consulted. For example, a patient is a real talker and is outwardly expressive of their emotions. If your style is more detailed/statistically oriented, using few words, you can become the Smile Behind the Mask and role shift to a person who talks more, shows more emotion, and relates much better to your patient's style.

With that role shift, your message is more readily received and your treatment plan more fully accepted.

The final and most important message is, as you Smile Behind the Mask, focus on the 'felt need' of the patient. For example, what does the patient see as their most important need? The best way to ensure that you understand this felt need is to ask the patient after listening to them. "I understand that X is your most important need or the reason that you came in today." "Is that right?"

Those two simple sentences let the patient know that you are listening to them and you want to make sure that you heard them correctly.

For example, if their primary felt need is a chip on a front tooth, address that need first, if at all possible. When you make sure that you discover and address that felt need and smile as you accomplish this task, that patient will feel that you are not just smiling behind your mask but LISTENING behind your mask as well. In the future, other needs will be accepted much more readily, just as long as you address their felt need first.

In this era of COVID and masks, we can accomplish effective communication and have our patients feel/see our caring concern. "Patients don't care how much you know until they know how much you care" (Linda Miles). So, practice the rules of The Smile Behind the Mask to show how much you care. In doing so you will more fully enjoy each and every day plus achieve success far beyond what you have ever imagined.

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