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ARE YOU LISTENING?

Dr. Sarah Friend

On a recent May day, my husband and I set out early one morning to move our daughter out of her college dorm for the summer. As my husband carefully wrapped the hand truck in a moving blanket and secured it in the truck bed, I noticed that it resembled a dead body. After I verbalized my observation, my husband responded, "Well, it might be by the end of the day."

We've done this a few times already, and it's never an experience we look forward to. We are arthritic, overweight, and out-of-shape Gen Xers. Climbing and descending multiple flights of stairs while carrying heavy loads in high heat differs from our idea of fun. Combine that with fighting hours of stop-and-go traffic on I-81, inadequate parking, and dealing with the emotions of an exam-weary, sleep-deprived, and hangry teenager, and something is bound to give. Inevitably, things never go to plan. We would be "dead," figuratively speaking, by the end of the day.

Several hours later, just two barrels and one rocker short of being ready for an episode of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, we were on our way back home. Typically, once fed, the daughter puts in her earbuds and sleeps the whole way home. She is not a talker. Neither am I. That day, though, she talked the entire trip, which ended up being a couple of hours longer because of traffic. Carefully listening, I gleaned a lot of information and perspective on how she and her friends in Generation Z are making career choices. The members of Generation Z, also known as Gen Z, the iGeneration, and Zoomers, were born between 1997 and 2012. This group of individuals is expected to overtake the Baby Boomers in the full-time workforce. You might wonder what this has to do with dentistry. I'll get to that.

My daughter grew up in a family made up of healthcare professionals. She has heard the good, the bad, and the ugly about medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, and nursing her entire life. Her long-term goal upon entering college was to prepare to go to medical school to be a dermatologist. Shortly after her first semester, the tide changed. She'd experienced the ramifications of a weed-out class and exams with content she'd never seen and didn't know. She

"Zoomers can provide us with additional innovative ideas to help us successfully make the changes needed to improve and preserve our profession."

and her friends spent countless hours studying and preparing yet did not get their expected return for their efforts. They were convinced the professor gave challenging exams for sport, as his reputation on social platforms preceded him. There's nothing like the feeling of tanking your GPA in the first semester of college, knowing full well that an almost perfect GPA is needed to be competitive in gaining entrance to coveted healthcare programs. Some people will tell you that it now takes a higher GPA to get into dental school than medical school, which is the reverse of when I applied

to dental school. The daughter became discouraged. I'd walked a similar path at the same institution thirty years ago. I knew what she was feeling, but I didn't want her to give up on achieving her career goals because of one class. Medicine and dentistry can be gratifying careers. The daughter is also acutely aware that the proceeds of jobs in healthcare are paying for her education and that her lifestyle has been better than many of her peers because of dentistry. There have been many conversations and more tears since that first semester. Fast forward to going into her third year, and my daughter has now completely given up on a healthcare career, as have some of her friends. She's known some of these friends since middle school, and they have won awards for their contributions to research and innovative ideas for the future of medicine. Notably, their parents were also in healthcare. These Zoomers are now pursuing degrees in technology. I wanted to know why these brilliant young minds were changing, so I asked.

My daughter's first statement was, "Because it's depressing". What? That made no sense. Just a few minutes prior, she had excitedly told us that she had taken part in a few medical studies to earn extra spending money and was fascinated by them. I was expecting her to tell me that she didn't want to have to deal with death or delivering bad news. She explained that she and her friends spent an extraordinary amount of time and energy studying, leaving little time to enjoy life as a young adult. One friend she knew was essentially working an unpaid, full-time research position on top of a full class load to boost her odds of getting into her desired healthcare program. That friend was exhausted and burned out, and she had not even graduated college yet. The daughter had met several medical

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students at the gym and said they were always tired, and even though they were young, their hair had already started turning gray. The daughter could not see herself spending the next decade of her life trading her mental and physical health for a profession that would continue to demand so much of her even beyond her initial education. Every resource I consulted regarding her generation noted that Generation Z is a hard-working generation that prioritizes mental health and overall well-being. They also aim to make work fit their lifestyle as they recognize that life is more than work.

Zoomers also aspire to achieve financial milestones relatively early in their careers. According to Forbes, “Gen Z usually prefer industries that tend to boast higher salaries, especially from the entry-level, including tech and consulting, both of which are dominated by world-famous companies within Big Tech and the Big Four.” My daughter had also been talking to cousins who, with only an undergraduate degree, made twice what I make as a seasoned general dentist. These Zoomers are well-informed and well-connected, with access to information and decision trees that many of us could not have imagined tapping into during our youth. The daughter went on to expound on all the TikToks she had watched where medical and dental students and graduates would talk about the extraordinary amount of debt they incurred pursuing their careers and the daily professional and financial stresses they faced. She was afraid of taking on so much debt early in life. The financial risk-rewards balance on the healthcare vs. tech scale had also tipped and played into the decision. “Oh, Mom, I was going to forward you some of these discounts and freebies for healthcare professionals, but you’re a dentist and don’t qualify. I think you’re more of a doctor than a nurse. That’s just not fair.”, she said. Stab to the heart.

As we rolled and scrolled, a social media post in one of my dental groups mentioned that dentistry had dropped to #70 on the *US News and World Report’s* 100 Best Careers of 2024. Just eleven years ago, we were ranked #1.

Why? What’s changed? In this post, our colleagues at all career stages opined all kinds of reasons. The most frequently cited ones were insurance, corporate dentistry, physical and emotional stress, inflation, workforce issues, and debt. Each of these things affects me and my colleagues daily.

According to the American Dental Education Association, the average reported debt for indebted students in the class of 2023 was \$296,500. I’ve seen a much higher range of indebtedness other graduates have posted on social media platforms, some approaching a million dollars. According to studentloanplanner.com, which ranked the top 30 professions with the highest student loan repayments based on a standard 10-year repayment plan, the top six positions were awarded to orthodontists, periodontists, oral surgeons, endodontists, pedodontists, and general dentists. These numbers can be very off-putting to a young person researching careers and factoring in debt into their decisions based on published data.

Dentistry and medicine are suffering from various outside burdens beyond our direct control, which have created a wave of frustrating challenges for our professions. As a result, those of us already in the profession are suffering. We are also losing interested and talented young people to industries that offer a better work-life balance, less mental and physical stress, and similar income to general dentists without the barter of their youth and finances for a degree. According to Rachel Wells, a contributor at Forbes, Gen Z “forces employers to do one of two things: either adjust to the wave of young talent which is set to dominate a 30% share of the global workforce by 2030 or remain stuck in tradition and refuse to change. The downsides are evident. If employers want to remain relevant and maintain their employer branding to attract fresh, innovative talent, they must move with the time and embrace change, adapt to Gen Z’s expectations, and respect their concerns.” We all agree that we must grow and maintain dentistry as a healthy

profession for future generations. Gen Z is right. It makes sense to want to pursue a low-stress profession with an excellent work-life balance and a high income without mountains of debt. It is also in the best interests of dentistry, medicine, and our communities to want to continue to attract the best and the brightest to take care of us. When Gen Z speaks, we should listen. Maybe, if we pay attention and ask for their help, Zoomers can provide us with additional innovative ideas to help us successfully make the changes needed to improve and preserve our profession.

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