

1-1-2024

## Staying Focused on a Moving Target: Coping with Change

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### Recommended Citation

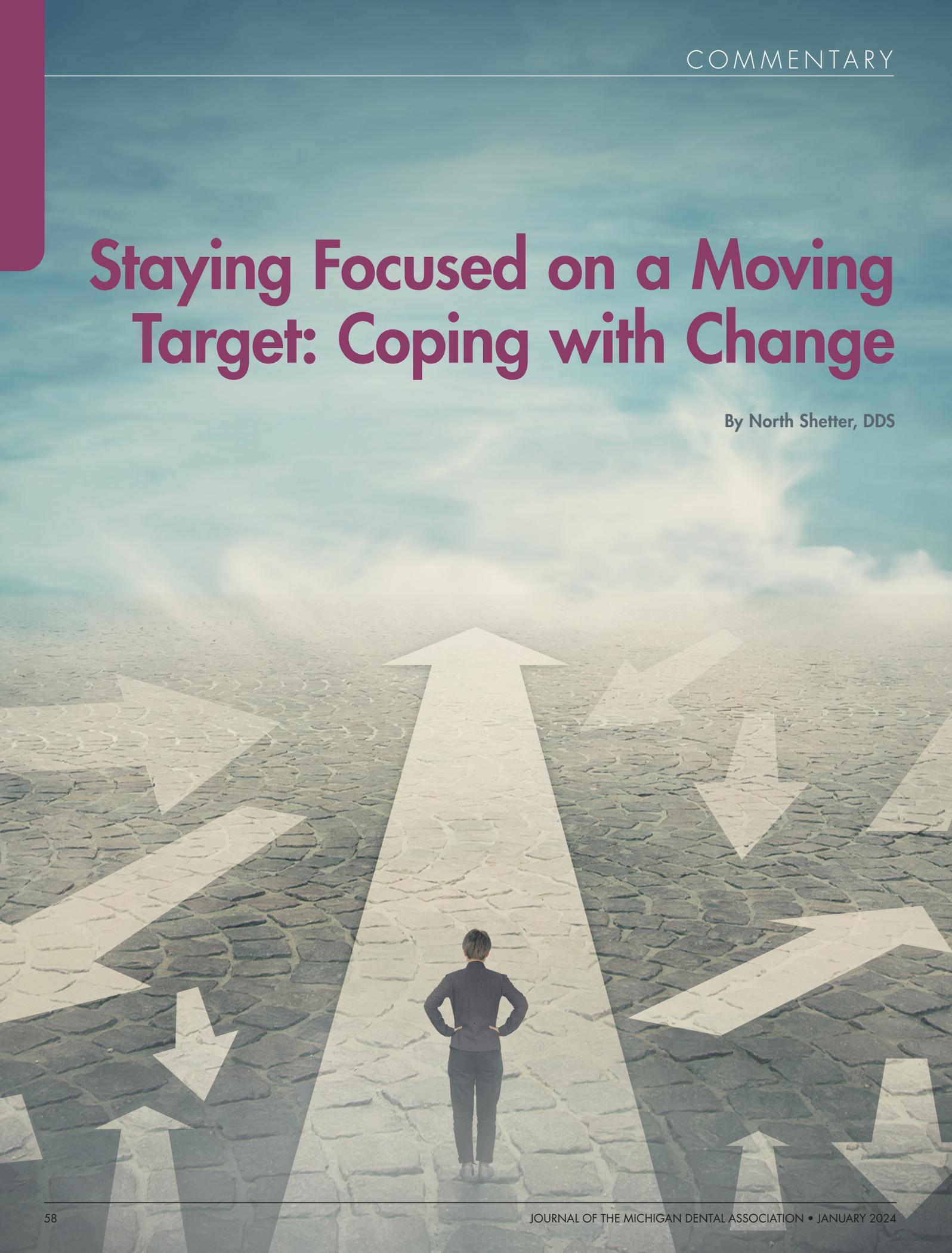
Shetter, North DDS (2024) "Staying Focused on a Moving Target: Coping with Change," *The Journal of the Michigan Dental Association*: Vol. 106: No. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://commons.ada.org/journalmichigandentalassociation/vol106/iss1/5>

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# Staying Focused on a Moving Target: Coping with Change

By North Shetter, DDS



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The speed of change in dentistry is rapid, and increasing. Change can be difficult, but can also bring new enjoyment to your dental career. By acknowledging change, focusing on core values, and looking for the possibilities they present, you'll see change as something positive in your practice life.

In the world of computer chip manufacturers there's a rule of thumb regarding microprocessor speed. The rule, known as Moore's Law, is that processing speed will double every 18 months. Hard as it might be to believe, this rule has held true for well over 50 years.

Although we are not moving at the speed of chip makers,, dentistry also is undergoing rapid and continuous change. For those of us who have been "in the trenches" for more than 20 years, the changes can be described by words such as "monumental," "frustrating," "frightening," or maybe even "challenging" and "exciting." For many in practice today, the future may seem difficult to define, and clear goals may be elusive. We currently face changes in technology, deliv-

ery of care, demographics, business practices, and patient expectations — to name just a few. Change *per se* is not bad. But, change can create stress if we feel threatened by it or unable to cope. This article will address some steps we can take to reduce stress in times of rapid change.

Let's first acknowledge that in times of rapid change we are often under heavy pressure in specific areas of our lives. We may face stress due to concerns over time, money, fear of the future, or other emotional issues. How will we juggle the schedule to fit in an urgent-care patient? We may have family pressure due to lack of time for children's issues. In times such as these it's imperative that we make time in each day to

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review where we are relative to our long-term and short-term goals, and to assess where we are relative to a balanced position between work, play, love, and worship.

This concept has been around for thousands of years. It was explained to dentists in terms we can understand by Dr. L. D. Pankey in his book, *A Philosophy of the Practice of Dentistry* (1987, Pankey Institute). The concept of a balanced life is one of the core elements of the so called “Pankey Philosophy.” Many others have discussed this concept, but few have explained it in more down-to-earth terms. Basically, any time your cross of life is out of balance you will not be

happy. If you feel stressed, re-asses your life and try to get more centered on the cross. Seldom will we be able to be totally in balance. However, the closer we can stay to the center, the more likely we will be working from a lower-stress position.

**Focus on yourself first**

The premise of Stephen Covey’s well-known *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* focuses on similar issues. We must first focus on developing within ourselves the principles of fairness, integrity, service, and excellence. Then we can begin to cope with or change the situation that we are in. We must first get our own lives in balance before we can effectively deal with issues around us. No one says it is easy. The point is that we must make a personal choice to seek balance. There are numerous re-

sources available for help. These may be books, DVDs, recordings, counseling CE courses, or other sources. Your first step is to make time in your life to define where you want to be in the future and what you are willing to do to get there. Then you can make the time available to look for the resources you need.

We are bombarded with new technology and information daily, and it’s easy to lose focus on the core skills that keep our practices running well. We need to have these core skills “on the shelf” before we drift off trying all the new gizmos and techniques that appear in our journals every day. To us, the core skills are a willingness to really get to know your patients, the basics of any dental school degree practiced daily, a great appreciation for periodontal health, an understanding of occlusion — including an-

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terior guidance and the anatomy of the jaw joint complex — and the willingness to be a student forever.

### Is your own mouth healthy?

One simple test as to whether you have the core skills clearly in mind is to assess whether you “own” a healthy mouth. If your own dental health is not the best that it can be, how can you suggest ideal treatment to others? How do you know what ideal treatment is? Find a dentist you trust and make the investment in “owning” a totally healthy mouth. Once you have a healthy mouth, shouldn’t your staff also understand what a healthy mouth can mean through your help and teaching? What better investment can you make than development of a staff that truly knows what it is to have a healthy mouth. Maximum comfort, function, health, and aesthetics mean much more when they are occurring in your own mouth. That is real “ownership.” When everyone in the office is on the same page regarding the mission of dental health in your office, the patients who you really get to know will sense a congruence that is strong, yet unspoken. The comfort level of your patients goes up dramatically in this sort of environment, and case acceptance goes up, too.

As we work hard at keeping our skills sharp and staying current with the latest technological marvels, it’s easy to get mired in the world of minutia. The role of the continuous student is not always to look at a margin with a higher-power microscope. It is also to step back and look at what we do through the eyes of our patients, our staff, and our business advisers. We need to continue to raise the level of care we deliver in a manner that all parties can understand. We need to remember not to take ourselves too seriously. Treat your staff and patients as your friends. Some of them may become true friends from whom you can learn a great deal. When we have good skills in an area or learn something new, share your knowledge. Enjoy your hard-earned and newfound skills.

### Study clubs can help

One of the best ways to stay motivated and to share your skills and knowledge in a positive environment is in a study club. Word of mouth among your peers at a local dental society meeting should be a good source of what groups are meeting in your area. These groups all are part of helping you keep your cross in balance. Also, they follow a part of the core concepts of Napoleon Hill in his book *Think and Grow Rich*. Mr. Hill suggests in his book that we all need a mastermind group of others whom we respect to share with. A dental study club made up of a diverse cross-section of your peers will fill a good part of this role.

In a study club you should share, learn, and teach. For more experienced members the club is an ideal place to

develop a mentor relationship. If you see someone struggling with an issue or skill that you do well, why not offer to mentor them in your special area? This venue is an ideal place to offer non-threatening help and support. From a specialist-generalist perspective this is an ideal place to develop a relationship that will make the specialist more comfortable with the general dentist’s skills. From the general dentist view, he or she can develop a higher comfort level in referrals without feeling that they are being inappropriately “courted” for their business.

There is no better way to learn a special skill or technique than to teach it to your peers. The study club situation is an ideal low-threat environment to develop new skills. The amount of experience and knowledge available in a group of 15 or 20 dental professionals is staggering. What a great opportunity to reap rewards on the investment of years of study! You win as teacher or student or friend. Patients win with a higher standard of care delivered by you and your peers.

Paraphrasing Dr. Robert Schuller in his book *You Can Be the Person You Want to Be*, when you lose focus on your goals, check your attitude. Not just simplistic positive mental attitude thoughts, but deeper thoughts that address the issues realistically, with a focus on core values and the possibilities they present. The winners in the long run from maintaining a goal-directed focus on a balanced life and your core skills are multiple. You, the professional, have less tendency to burn out under stress. Your patients, staff, family, and peers will experience a higher standard of care from a happy professional. In a world where information overload is a reality, you will be more able to cope and see the future as a positive, fulfilling place for you and your patients. ●

### About the Author

**North Shetter, DDS**, recently retired after 47 years in practice, having spent four years in the military and 43 years in private practice in Menominee, Mich. He is a life member of the ADA, MDA, and AGD, and a Fellow in the AGD and the ICD. He is still active in several dental study groups and has been an adjunct professor during the winter at LECOM Dental School near Bradenton, Fla. He is a published author whose articles have appeared in the *MDA Journal*, among other publications.

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