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## The New Professional: Mastering those Awkward Moments with Patients

Amrita Patel DDS

General Practice, New York City, amripatel@nyu.edu

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By Amrita Patel, DDS

# Mastering those Awkward Moments with Patients

**D**ealing with awkward and difficult moments in a dental office is an inevitable part of patient care. Whether it's an uncomfortable silence,

a difficult question, or a misunderstanding, navigating these situations with professionalism and empathy is crucial for maintaining positive patient experiences. While these situations are unavoidable, here are some pearls I have used myself to help ease the tension and create a welcoming environment.

First, begin every patient interaction by establishing rapport. Greet patients warmly and introduce yourself to create a comfortable atmosphere. Use active listening techniques to demonstrate empathy and understanding. Pay attention to non-verbal cues, such as body language and facial expressions. Identify common scenarios that may lead to awkwardness, such as discussing financial matters, addressing dental anxiety, or delivering bad news about treatment options. Anticipate these moments and prepare responses in advance to maintain professionalism and confidence.

I've noticed that misunderstandings are often at the root of most issues in our offices. So, use clear and concise language when communicating with patients. Avoid dental jargon and technical terms that may confuse or intimidate them. Practice listening and validate patients' concerns and feelings. Repeat what they've said to ensure understanding and convey empathy. One of the biggest fears I hear about is the pain associated with dental treatment. It's okay to acknowledge this fear, and talk about the process of the procedure you're about to perform. This can help alleviate tension while also validating your patients' worries.

When you're faced with difficult or sensitive questions, remain calm and composed. Avoid becoming defensive or dismissive. Provide honest and transparent answers, but also know when to tactfully redirect the conversation to maintain focus on the patient's well-being.

Confronting tough situations was one of my biggest challenges in private practice, and I often wanted to tell

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my team that an upset patient was usually asking for the "other Dr. Patel" — my father, not me! But in the event of unexpected treatment challenges or complications, just communicate openly with patients about the situation. Provide clear explanations and options for moving forward. I've observed that discussing the best possible outcome for a situation, while also informing my patients about possible challenges and roadblocks, avoids any unnecessary false expectations.

Training sessions, whether these are in-office or at continuing education events, are crucial in making sure that the entire team is on the same page as you. Role-play common scenarios to build confidence and improve communication skills, and provide constructive feedback, thus encouraging continuous improvement among team members.

Lastly, remember that you are the captain of your ship. Cultivate a positive environment, centered around a culture of empathy, respect, and professionalism within your office. Encourage open communication and collaboration among staff members. Regularly solicit feedback from patients to identify areas for improvement and to ensure that their experiences are consistently positive. Consistently survey your patients to make sure that you are addressing their needs and to identify areas where your team could do better.

By establishing rapport, anticipating common challenges, and honing your communication skills you'll find you can navigate awkward situations with confidence, and ensure that patients feel valued and supported throughout their dental care journey. ●

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*The New Professional appears monthly in the Journal. Send suggestions for future topics to Dave Foe, Journal managing editor, at [dfoe@michigandental.org](mailto:dfoe@michigandental.org).*