

PROFESSIONALISM

CONFLICT

Angry confrontations



BACKGROUND

When a patient or the parent of a patient is presented by the dental practitioner with evidence that he or she has failed in some way, one natural response can be anger at the dentist or dental staff. The practitioner needs to understand the genesis of the anger and how to resolve the situation.

ANGER

Anger is a natural human defense brought on by an internal desire to avoid being injured emotionally. It's initiated in many cases by causes such as fear of experiencing guilt, insignificance, uselessness, or rejection and is seldom an emotion seen without context. Anger insulates people from experiencing anxiety, distress, or humiliation in circumstances where they may have failed in some way.

Angry people usually have no insight into what is causing their response, which is essentially self-preservation. If the angry person is also dealing with other difficult challenges in his or her life, the need to avoid being vulnerable can be intense, which escalates the situation and increases the degree of anger expressed.

Commonly, when an individual's behavior or attitude is identified by another person as a possible failure on her or his part, the individual's natural response can be to counterattack the one giving the information. The attack is the individual's attempt to avoid taking responsibility for failure. By turning the tables and attacking rather than assuming responsibility or taking corrective action, the individual avoids the emotional injury associated with guilt.

RESPONSES

How should a professional respond to an angry patient or parent? The immediate inclination can be to retaliate in kind and defend

oneself against the assault. However, an angry response to anger seldom achieves conflict resolution. Instead, emotions tend to escalate and can lead to further destructive words or worse.

The professional should recognize the source of the situational anger and attempt to resolve the situation before it escalates. Sometimes that means lowering the rhetoric and defusing the situation so that the 2 parties can part amicably. Sometimes that isn't possible. In some instances, the patient or parent may choose to find another source of care. Any refund that is demanded can be a part of the situation and should be handled without creating further disharmony.

Clinical Significance

It's difficult to deal with angry patients or parents of patients, but the situation will occur at some point in the dentist's career—perhaps even more than once. The key is to understand the etiology of the patient's or parent's anger and recognize the behavior for what it is—an attempt to protect oneself from emotional injury. Dentists can then take care to de-escalate the situation through peaceful words and actions. Whether the patient stays or goes to another practitioner should not be the issue; remaining calm when accosted by the angry person and restoring peace should be the goals.

Greco PM: A recipe for conflict. *Am J Orthod Dentofacial Orthop* 154:620, 2018

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