

## The same to you

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Your neighbor calls a few days before the long Memorial Day weekend. She asks if you'll see a dismayed young adult patient who is visiting from overseas and has fractured a bracket. The wire is annoying her cheek to the point where she can not function without distraction or discomfort. Although you've closed the office for the holiday, you gladly agree to help. You instruct your neighbor to have the patient meet you at the office early the next day.

The young lady arrives with her father, neither of whom speak a word of English. Through gestures and miniature sketches, they communicate that not only is the mandibular right second premolar bracket loose, but she is also biting her cheek at the ipsilateral second molar region. The more she traumatizes the area, the more inflamed the tissue becomes. So you quickly rebond the bracket, occlusally adjust the prominent cusps of the offending maxillary molar, and reengage the archwire. The father's and daughter's sincere gratitude are plainly evident despite the language barrier between you. They leave the office with a deep, respectful bow, but without any attempt to pay for the service you have provided for them.

The concept of the *norm of reciprocity* calls for a response in kind for a deed. A positive norm of reciprocity implies that the recipient will respond via an equally supportive effort with intent to "pay back" for the good that he has received. Conversely, a negative norm of reciprocity involves retaliatory action in response for an adverse act.<sup>1</sup>

An enduring example of the norm of reciprocity involves a study in which the investigators sent greeting cards to total strangers. They randomly chose 578 names and addresses from a Chicago phone book and mailed Christmas cards with the lead investigator's family photo to each address. A handwritten greeting and signature was included to convey a personal touch. Not one addressee was known to the investigators. A remarkable 117 recipients (20%), all of whom were total strangers, sent a card in return. Some of these replies chronicled the family's events that year. Others revealed

scholastic and career accomplishments, and some communicated accounts about the status of their pets.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately the study was truncated when a local radio show host called for termination of the experiment, eliminating the possibility of continued response frequency. The investigation exemplified the norm of reciprocity, in which total strangers were motivated to return a gesture of kindness.

Reciprocity has been labeled as "an internalized social norm."<sup>1(p.251)</sup> As orthodontists, reciprocity is almost routine. Consider an initially sour patient who becomes docile after she realizes that you and your office staff maintain her interests as your priority. She initially greets your staff with arrogance, possibly owing to her previous experience in seeking health care in which she had waited excessively long to be seen, was greeted with discourtesy, and was rushed through her visit by her doctor. As your staff receives her with genuine warmth and kindness, she begins to undergo a change in attitude. Your genuine interest in her welfare as you listen to her concerns validates her as a person, rather than another plus to your monthly production. If all goes well, you've gained a patient, earned a friend, and developed an advocate for your reputation.

A week after you had seen the young visitor in your office to remediate her problem, a small package arrives from overseas. In it is a small, lead-crystal clock with a golden face, bearing an inscription in English: "Always grateful."

Orthodontics is indeed a wonderful profession. Not only does it afford us a constructive opportunity to change the faces and the function of our trusting patients, but moreover it provides us with the opportunity for reciprocity that few professions enjoy. That opportunity might be our specialty's greatest gift—to us as well as to our patients.

### REFERENCES

1. Perugini M, Galluci M, Presaghi F, Ercolani A. The personal norm of reciprocity. *Eur J Pers* 2003;17:251-83.
2. Tannenbaum M. I'll show you my Christmas card if you show me yours: Available at: <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/psysociety/i-8217-ll-show-you-my-holiday-card-if-you-show-me-yours/>. Accessed February 18, 2019.