Communication in the Dental Office

Chapter 61
Learning Objectives
Lesson 61.1: Human Psychology and Communication Skills

1. Pronounce, define, and spell the key terms.
2. Explain why it is important to understand human behavior.
3. Describe cultural diversity.
4. Discuss communication pathways and identify the differences between verbal and nonverbal communication.
5. Describe the importance of communicating effectively with colleagues.
6. Discuss communicating with patients, including identifying and meeting patient needs.
Introduction

- Good communication in all forms is the backbone of a well-run organization
- Learning about interpersonal communication allows you to communicate what you mean and to interpret what others say and do correctly
Understanding Human Behavior

- The collection of actions performed by human beings who have been influenced by a person’s culture, attitudes, emotions, values, ethics, and authority
  - The behavior of people can be viewed as “normal,” common, acceptable, or even unusual or unacceptable
Significant People in Psychology

There have been several psychologists who have been instrumental in researching the way we understand how individuals behave in their personal and professional life

- Sigmund Freud
  - People have conscious and unconscious thoughts, and our purpose in life is to control our instincts and the power of these thoughts

- Erik Erikson
  - A person’s identity is individual and it comes from the past and from one’s heritage
Significant People in Psychology (Cont.)

- **Carl Rogers**
  - Human beings are intrinsically good and friendly
  - They are born with these qualities; it is society and their surroundings that diminish these qualities

- **B.F. Skinner**
  - Assumed that behavior is learned
  - Any behavior that is a threat can be changed by learning to solve problems; positive behavior is acknowledged by positive reinforcement

- **Abraham Maslow**
  - Believed that humans cannot live without needs
  - Categorized needs in groups with different rankings
Social Attitudes

- As a person grows and develops in life, social attitudes begin to influence behavior and a cultural way of thinking.
- We tend to internalize the attitudes of others around us by making their attitudes our own.
Peer Pressure

- We often have the tendency to adapt our behavior so as to fit in with a particular group.
- Peer pressure is seen when a person conforms to the general behavior of a group of peers in an attempt to feel more acceptable within that group.
- Peer pressure can have a negative or positive effect.
Cultural Diversity

- Differences that must be appreciated and understood include:
  - Gender
  - Race
  - Cultural heritage
  - Age
  - Physical abilities
  - Spiritual beliefs
Cultural Diversity (Cont.)

- Verbal and nonverbal language varies among cultures
  - Encourage all members of the team to learn various cultural traditions and always show respect for these traditions when providing patient care
Communication Pathways

- Effective communication is one of the most important aspects of a dental assistant’s job.
- We spend most of our day communicating with others.
- We communicate with words, facial expressions, appearance, gestures, mannerisms, listening, voice inflection, attitudes, and actions.
- The two parts of the message identified above are grouped into the two general categories of verbal and nonverbal communication.
Verbal Communication

- Verbal communication is made up of the words we use
- Words are important
  - Always select words that will not frighten, intimidate, or upset a patient
- Voice quality
- Asking questions
  - Closed-ended questions
  - Open-ended questions
Nonverbal Communication

- Body language
  - The messages we send
  - The way we carry ourselves and move about
- Posture, movements, and attitudes transmit major messages
- Facial expressions indicate a wide range of emotional states
Listening Skills

- To be a good listener:
  - Don’t let your mind wander
    - Put aside personal concerns while the patient is talking
  - Don’t concentrate on formulating a reply
    - Concentrate on what the patient is actually saying
  - Look as well as listen
    - Pick up both the verbal and nonverbal information the patient is transmitting
More Ways to Be a Good Listener

- Do not stereotype
  - A person’s appearance, cultural background, race, or religion should not influence your response

- Be careful of selective hearing
  - Sometimes we hear only parts of what someone is saying

- Do not get impatient
  - Especially if the patient is a child or an older adult
Communicating with Colleagues

- Working in a positive, challenging, and stress-free environment is what everyone wants from their place of employment
  - A patient can tell right away what level of harmony exists in a particular dental setting
- The one key to a successful work environment is TEAMWORK
Being a Team Member

- Be flexible and receptive to altering the way responsibilities are performed
- Be self-confident and use self-initiative when it is time to get things done
- Show appreciation to coworkers
- Think before speaking
- Do not let your emotions get overly involved
- Remember that the first impression is not always the right one
- Share the ups and downs of the day
- “Your way” may not always be the right way
Stress in the Dental Office

- An important aspect of good communication is how you handle stress in your personal life and at work.
- The dental atmosphere can be a very stressful environment, and this can affect the way you deal with your patients and coworkers.
Causes of Stress in the Dental Office

- Causes of stress include:
  - Lack of sufficient staff
  - Appointment overbooking
  - Multiple tasks required simultaneously
  - Lack of good communication
  - Perceived lack of job advancement
Methods of Stress Reduction

You can reduce stress by maintaining a lifestyle that includes:

- Regular exercise
- Taking time for yourself
- Leaving the office behind at the end of the day
- Eating properly
- Setting realistic expectations
Conflict Among Coworkers

- If differences or conflict among colleagues are creating stress, learn how to work through those differences by engaging in team-building dialogue
  - Conflict is necessary for effective problem solving and for effective interpersonal relationships
  - Unfortunately, unresolved conflict tends to escalate
Communicating with Patients

- Effective communication is important in achieving patient satisfaction
- Patients who have good relationships with their dentist and the dental staff are likely to:
  - Stay with the practice
  - Accept the treatment presented to them
  - Pay for their treatment on time
  - Refer other patients to the practice
Patient Needs

- Patients build their relationship with their dentist and dental staff through confidence and trust.
- Patients base their perceptions about a practice on the following factors:
  - How they are treated on the phone
  - How they are greeted
  - How they are made to feel in the office
  - How efficiently the staff manages business aspects, such as billing and insurance
Psychological Needs

• More obvious when a patient appears tense, suspicious, apprehensive, and resistant to suggested treatment
  ➢ One major factor is the patient’s current life situation

• Other important factors are:
  ➢ Previous dental experiences
  ➢ Attitudes and beliefs about the importance of his or her teeth
Anxiety and Fear of Pain

- For many patients, it is the expectation of pain, not actual pain, that causes the greatest distress
  - Subjective fears, also known as *acquired fears*, are based on feelings, attitudes, and concerns that have developed at the suggestion of peers, siblings, parents, or other individuals
  - Objective fears, also known as *learned fears*, are those related to the patient’s experiences and his or her own memories of those experiences
Dental-Phobic Patients

- For some patients, the mere suggestion of a routine dental visit can bring an overwhelming sensation of panic and terror.
- Patients with the most severe cases of dental phobia avoid routine treatment completely.
- They will only seek urgent or emergency treatment with the most aggravated of dental symptoms.
Patient’s Responses

• Responses are influenced by the patient’s total personality and by background experiences

• A patient’s response to the situation results primarily from causes that are not part of the present situation
  ➢ Causes are probably not understood by patient and will most likely remain unknown to dental team

• The patient’s anxieties concerning treatment may result in hostile, irrational, and inappropriate behavior
  ➢ Hostility is an expression of a patient’s anxieties and is not caused by, or directed at, dental personnel
Physical and Mental Needs

● Maintenance of high standards requires sensitivity to the patient’s physical and mental needs.

● The patient registration form and the medical-dental history form should include questions about the patient’s dental and medical health.

● Patients with physical or mental impairment have complicated and special needs that must be considered before and during provision of dental treatment.
Financial Needs

- Often, a major obstacle to patient acceptance is the cost of treatment
- Patients may believe that:
  - The fees are too high
  - They are unable to afford the treatment
  - That they do not need the treatment
- Many people do not equate dental care with basic human needs such as shelter and food
  - Getting people to understand the benefits and advantages of appropriate treatment requires good communication skills
Meeting the Patient’s Needs

- Positive atmosphere
- Sincerity
- Showing respect
- Respecting the patient’s time
- Resolving complaints and misunderstandings
- Remaining approachable
- Respecting patient confidentiality
Learning Objectives
Lesson 61.2: Phone Skills, Written Communication, and Marketing in the Dental Office

7. Discuss phone skills, including the following:
   - Describe good phone courtesy.
   - Describe and compare the handling of different types of phone calls.
   - Describe the types of available phone message systems.
   - Describe phone equipment.

8. Discuss written communication, including the following:
   - Describe different formats of business letters.
   - Describe the parts of a business letter.

9. Discuss marketing your dental practice, including external and internal marketing.
Phone Skills

- The phone is your most important piece of equipment used in public relations
- Most patients make their first contact with the dental office by phone
- On the basis of this first contact, the patient forms an opinion of the practice
- This opinion reflects on the dentist and dental team and even on the quality of care provided—although no actual care has yet been provided
Etiquette

- Remember to:
  - Smile; it shows in your voice
  - Never chew gum, eat, drink, or have a pen or pencil in your mouth while talking on the phone
  - Speak directly into the phone
  - Speak clearly and slowly
  - Ask the name of the person who is calling, and talk to him or her, not to the phone
  - When completing a call, always allow the person who originated the call to hang up first
Incoming Calls

- The phone should be answered promptly, preferably after the first ring
- Use the wording preferred by the dentist at your practice
- Greet the patient pleasantly
- Identify the practice and yourself
- Ask how you may help the caller
Working with Difficult Callers

- Listen without interrupting
- Gather all necessary information
- Take note of details
- Sympathize with the caller
- Stay calm
Placing a Caller on Hold

- Before placing a caller on hold, ask for his or her permission
  - Wait for the caller’s response before pressing the “hold” or “mute” button
  - Always be courteous and do not expect the caller to remain on hold for longer than a few moments
  - If necessary, ask whether you can return the call and give a specific time when you will do so
On-Hold Message Systems

- Consist of recorded messages or music used by the practice to make “on-hold” time educational and more pleasant for callers than a waiting signal.
- These messages may explain a variety of treatments and services available at the practice.
- The messages or musical interludes are broken occasionally by recordings by professional announcers who apologize for any delay and thank the caller for waiting.
Callers Wanting to Speak to the Dentist

- The dentist should not be interrupted at chairside to come to the phone
- Phone interruptions:
  - Reduce productivity and cause treatment delays
  - Are inconsiderate to the seated patient
  - Make it difficult for the dental team to maintain infection control protocols
- The most common exceptions for which a dentist should come to the phone are to talk with another dentist, the dental laboratory technician, or an immediate family member
Taking Messages

- Make a written notation of all incoming calls, particularly those that require further action
- Many practices use a printed form or a phone log to organize this information
- At the beginning of the conversation, note caller’s name, and then ask the appropriate questions
- If you promise to follow through on a call, be sure to do just that
- When the dentist is expected to return a call to a patient, have the appropriate patient records ready for the dentist when you deliver the message
Phone Message Systems

- Answering service
- If an answering service is used, learn how to use the services properly
  - In general, it is necessary to call the service and notify service staff when the office is closing
- When the office reopens, call the service immediately to notify service staff that you are back and will be taking incoming calls again
  - At this time, service staff will give you the messages they have taken during your absence
Answering Machine

- The message on the machine should provide the following information:
  - The identification of the office
  - Why the phone is being answered by a recording
  - The time at which the office will reopen
  - Whom to contact in case of emergency
  - Basic instructions on how to leave a message
Voice Mail

Many dental practices prefer to use a voice mail service to allow the caller to select a variety of options

- Voice mail services allow you to leave a recorded greeting; however, no physical machine is kept in the dental office
- Messages are retrieved by calling an access number and entering a security code number
Patients’ Preferred Method of Communication

- Collect your patients’ preferred method of communication
- Do not assume that a single method of communication will meet everyone’s needs
Emailing and Automated Dialing Services

- Email etiquette: Mind your manners, watch your tone, be concise, use correct spelling/grammar, ask before you send an attachment, wait to fill in the “to” email address

- With a patient appointment phone reminder service, patients can be contacted in a professional manner reminding them of their upcoming appointment
Text Messaging

- Texting is all around us
- Use it for quick reminders, alerts, and appointment confirmations
- Can also be used to notify a patient that the office is running late for an upcoming appointment
Phone Equipment: Headsets

- A headset is a lightweight combination of an earphone and a microphone that rests on the assistant’s head and allows the person to move about the office and talk on the phone
  - The advantage of a headset is that the business assistant’s hands are free to do other things
  - For many users, a headset also creates less neck and elbow strain than a traditional handpiece/receiver
Phone Equipment: Pager

- Many dentists need to be “on call” during weekends or while away from the practice
  - A pager is a mobile system that contacts the dentist through an answering service or by calling a special number that is left on the answering machine
Phone Equipment: Facsimile (Fax) Machine

- Many dental practices work closely with other specialty offices and must convey patient information to other dentists or healthcare professionals
- Uses of the fax machine in the dental office can include:
  - Placing orders with suppliers
  - Relaying and receiving patient information
  - Sending information to insurance companies
Written Communications

- Many types of communication originate from the dental practice
- It is important to realize that, other than speaking with someone on the phone, written communication is the most important public relations tool of a practice
Equipment

- If one of your responsibilities in the dental office is to correspond through written communication, you will be required to learn how to use the necessary business equipment within the office.
- The computer is the operating system used today for all forms of written communication.
- A copier allows you to make duplicates of documents that must be sent to a patient, another dentist, a dental laboratory, or a supply company.
Business Letters

- An appropriate business letter is essential when conveying a professional image
  - Every letter or correspondence mailed from your dental office must be produced on high-quality, professionally designed stationery
  - Letters must be concise, accurate, and neat and should be proofread for spelling and grammatical errors
  - Misspelled words and poor grammar convey the image of an office that does not care about quality
Types of Business Letters

Many practices send letters to their patients for a variety of reasons, including:

- Welcome to the practice
- Congratulations
- Acknowledgment of a referral
- Completion of an extensive case
- Continuing care (recall)
- Missed appointment
- Proposed treatment
- Collection of payment
Letters to Colleagues

- Dentists frequently communicate with other professionals in writing.
- It is the job of the alert dental assistant to ensure that these communications take place in an expedient and professional manner.
- Letters to the dentist’s colleagues may include examination findings or referral to specialists.
- Important to check for spelling accuracy and consistency when sending written communications to other professional practices.
Letters to Insurance Carriers

• When completing written correspondence to insurance carriers, make sure the following items are included:
  ➢ Patient identification information
  ➢ Case information
  ➢ Radiographs
Format of a Business Letter

- Using the proper business letter format is one step in making your business more professional
  - You can simplify the process of creating a properly formatted business letter by using your word processing software program
- Choose one of the following formats:
  - Block letter format
  - Semi-block letter format
  - Alternative block letter format
  - Simplified letter format
Parts of a Business Letter

- The components of a letter and its layout on the page are standardized into sections
  - Return address
  - Date
  - Recipient’s name and address
  - Greeting/salutation
  - Subject
  - Body
  - Closing
  - Signature
  - Enclosure and CC (carbon copy)
Marketing Your Dental Practice

- Encompasses all activities involved in attracting new patients to the practice and retaining satisfied ones
- Initiation and development of a marketing plan are the responsibilities of the dentist
- For a marketing plan to be successful, all members of the dental team must be actively and enthusiastically involved in planning, implementing, and monitoring the plan
Goals of Practice Marketing

- Primary goal of marketing plan is to create a positive image of the practice where patients receive quality treatment in a caring atmosphere.
- The positive and cooperative attitudes of all staff members are vital in successfully creating this image.
- A secondary goal is to enroll new patients at the practice.
- An important part of achieving this goal is determine the perceived needs of potential patients and seek out ways to meet these needs.
Logistics of Marketing

Most practices with successful marketing programs attribute this success to good organization, attention to detail, determination of a budget, and tracking of the results

- The plan
  - Written goals and dates must be established

- Marketing budget
  - Average ranges between 3% and 5% of the previous year’s gross revenues

- Tracking responses
  - Determines the success of the marketing plan
Types of Practice Marketing

- External marketing activities take place outside the office and are directed to people who are not patients.
- Activities include:
  - Health fairs
  - Presentations to schoolchildren or senior citizen groups
- External marketing activities may require staff members’ participation in the community.
Types of Practice Marketing (Cont.)

- Internal marketing strategies are those activities and promotions that are targeted to current patients of the practice
  - Publishing a practice newsletter
  - Developing promotional materials for insertion into monthly statements
  - Sending flowers or other appropriate “thank you” gifts to those who refer new patients to the practice
  - Sending birthday or other special occasion cards to patients
  - Sponsoring giveaways, office open hours, and other promotional events
The newsletter represents a valuable communication tool for the practice.

Purposes include the following:

- Keeping patients aware of new technology and treatment advances
- Keeping in touch with the dentist and members of the dental team
- Listing patients’ names as referral sources or contest winners
  - Note: Names are used only with the patients’ permission
- Announcing other changes that have taken place within the practice
Patient Educational Materials

- Printed pamphlets
- Brochures
- Statement “stuffers”
Questions?