

VIEWPOINT

Eileen Morrissey, RDH, MS



*‘Of course,
I’m
listening
to you ...’*

I recently had the pleasure of hearing *Dental Economics*' editor, Dr. Joe Blaes, lecture to a group of dentists at Jersey Shore Hospital's continuing-education program. It was a treat for many reasons, one of which is that Joe has the gift of being "user-friendly." Everyone left feeling they had spent the day with a wise and learned pal.

Another sign of a great lecturer is one who admits his weaknesses to a group. Joe spoke on the topic of communication, and divulged that when it comes to listening, he falls short. He admitted he is guilty, instead, of thinking how he can deliver a polished response to the person he's supposed to be listening to.

Hearing that sparked me to write this article, because I've done some recent research on the concept of *mindful listening* for a lecture I present. Apparently, many of us do what Joe does. Frequently, we slip into an "automatic pilot" dialogue that enables us to carry on an interactive exchange at which we are present physically, but mentally we are "checked out."

Why aren't we 100 percent attentive during many of our conversations? There are plenty of reasons.

One reason is that we put internal barriers in place that distract us. Perhaps the greatest reason is a preoccupation with the almighty self.

We are not listening fully because we are thinking about the chat that we had with our spouse that morning or the errands we must run after work. Or, as in Joe's case, we are thinking about the best response to come back with.

When we listen completely to someone, a rare gift is exchanged. Remember those moments in your life when you *knew* that the other person was giving you his or her undivided attention? How great was that? Case acceptance and staff management would happen far more easily if we could just get this practice down to a science.

It takes a concerted effort. We have to *want* to fully be there. How often are we guilty of giving only 40 percent of our listening energy and faking out our conversation partner on the rest? We go through the motions, nodding our heads, saying, "uh huh," and throwing in a little eye contact for good measure. It happens so automatically that we are barely aware.

I'm starting to realize that I do this in many of my exchanges. My 8-year old called me on it, point blank, one day. "You weren't even listening to me, Mom," she said. It stung—deservedly so. How many of us are getting "caught" every day and end up being silently rejected by the other person, rather than being confronted? These are lost opportunities,

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lost rare gifts, and lost insights!

How we change this in our selves seems to be the paramount question. Consider the following:

Practice *being in the moment* during conversations, as well as in all other actions. Refocus every time you catch yourself drifting. "Mental noting" is the discipline of being aware of all of the senses during all of your activities. Try it! For example, when you cut the tooth, be conscious of your foot on the pedal, the noise of the handpiece, the feel of your gloves, as well as the form of the preparation itself. Practicing mindfulness with concerted effort, on a regular basis, will invite the same listening technique to flow over into all of your other activities, including conversations when you used to *pretend* to be listening.

You may ask: Doesn't that require boundless energy? The answer is ... "No." It makes us incredibly efficient. One moment of mindfulness equals many moments of mindlessness. "Multi-tasking" is not all it's cracked up to be!

All of us experience the feeling that time passes too quickly. How can it be the New Year when July 4 was just here? And how can my child be in high school, when seemingly yesterday, she was a baby in my arms? The "aha" moment of a lifetime came to me when I read that time passes quickly because *we spend no time being focused on it*. Suddenly, the automatic pilot dialogue I had delivered through the years as a response to anyone bemoaning this fleetingness came back to me in a flash.

I finally get it ... and I understand the solution. Make every effort to bring mindfulness not only to your conversations with others, but to your every waking moment as well. I believe that every aspect of your life will change in a positive way when you do so.

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