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Society constantly tells us to improve; lose weight, banish wrinkles and get that perfect Hollywood smile. Continual pressure to conform has people doubting their appearance. Everyday there are dental patients who are self-conscious about their teeth and smile; they let their mouths dictate their level of confidence and are unable to live a full, rounded life.

When the word ‘denture’ is mentioned, the psychology of patients varies considerably across a broad spectrum. Some are completely comfortable with their dentures, for example, playing tricks with their dentures to amuse their grandchildren. Others are ashamed, and wish to keep their dentures secret, so those close to them, even their partners in some cases, are unaware that they have dentures.

Reading your patients

As the principal of a denture referral practice, I see the whole spectrum of issues and fears. It’s helpful to divide patients into groups, starting with those who would be happy with dentures if they were to fit well and look natural. The second group will never be happy, regardless of the look and fit, because they don’t like the idea of teeth going in and out of their mouths. These patients are prime candidates for fixed implant solutions.

For those who are unhappy with the function of their dentures, they worry the dentures will drop and become loose. Restaurants can be an issue as patients feel they must check their teeth between courses or take extra precautions in what they order for fear of not being able to chew properly. There are some who refuse to go to restaurants due to denture difficulties.

Lack of confidence

Dentures can affect private lives, for example, those who feel awkward and nervous when kissing assume the other person can tell they are wearing dentures, especially if they move. There is also a common fear about dental fixative, as patients are worried too much will ooze between their teeth, as they have to apply so much, or their dentures will fall out when speaking if fixative is not used.

Cosmetically, patients sometimes refrain from having their photo taken, as they despise the appearance of their teeth. Many put their hands over their mouths when talking, and don’t smile, as they feel incredibly uncomfortable. One of the biggest fears is the thought of anyone seeing them without dentures. For some, there is a fear of friends observing them closely, but being too polite to ask, ‘Are you wearing dentures?’

Sensitive patients generally feel embarrassment, shame and guilt about dentures. Many get angry with themselves for not taking better care of their teeth when they were younger. The thought of having dentures fitted can be extremely daunting making the whole procedure difficult for both the patient and dentist. Observing particular signs when dealing with wary patients will help assess the situation. It is important to isolate the area of concern with a sensitive approach.

The final group of patients are fixated with their dentures, and know denture terminology very well. They may be very critical of the dentist at each stage of the treatment. It is important to be realistic about expectations, and dentists must be prepared not to take on patients if significant improvement in the denture is unlikely.

Developing trust

It is imperative for dental professionals to talk to their patients and develop a trusting relationship. The dentist should ask questions so they can judge the patient’s reaction and decide on an appropriate course of treatment. It is not uncommon to have patients in tears over the possibility of losing their last remaining teeth. It is difficult for dentists to estimate the life changing effects on a patient when taking them from a poorly fitting denture to an excellent, functional and cosmetic one.

Thoroughly explaining the procedure and allowing an opportunity to ask questions will reassure the patient, proving they are treated as an individual. In my view, dentists need to add in extra time and cost in order to have these conversations and not rush treatment. This is more important with dentures than other dental treatments because of the huge psychological impact dentures have on many patients. Gaining the patient’s confidence will ease the process, and they will be much happier to co-operate and go ahead with recommendations.

About the author

Justin Stewart was the first qualified Biofunctional Prosthetic System (BPS) dentist in the UK. He is a member of the American Prosthetic Society and the British Society for the Study of Prosthetic Dentistry. Dr Stewart has recently been appointed to Dr Joe Massad’s International Advisory Board. An experienced lecturer, Dr Stewart is dedicated to resolving denture related problems through teaching and training. For further information please email Justin Stewart at enquiries@thedentureclinic.co.uk

Dr Justin Stewart considers the psychological impact of wearing dentures