



How to Maintain Professionalism While Enduring Personal Trauma

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As dentists, we enjoy all the privileges that accompany a high level of education. We are able to provide for our families, and, with careful planning, can preserve enough personal time to enjoy a fine quality of life. Unfortunately, no amount of privilege or planning can protect us from personal tragedy.

Patients depend on us for care. In addition to caring for their oral health, our comprehensive care sometimes requires insight into our patients' emotional status and details of their personal experiences. We listen. We empathize. We advise. We treat. We refer. But when we are the ones under emotional duress, we are often required to quell our own needs while we take care of our patients. When tragedy strikes, how do we continue to demonstrate to our patients the level of compassion, ethics and professionalism that is expected of health care professionals?

Everyone deals with trauma in different ways. We can't offer a solution that will work for everyone, but we can make some suggestions about how to maintain a professional demeanor when you feel like you're doing everything you can to hold yourself together.

Acknowledge what you're experiencing. If you were physically ill, you would recognize the need for rest and repair and adjust accordingly. When you've undergone an emotional trauma, it may be more difficult to recognize that need and to make the proper adjustments. Furthermore, if you're fine physically, it might be challenging to self-diagnose your need to heal emotionally.

Be patient. There's no timeline for rehabilitating your emotional well-being. Some people take longer than others, and, unfortunately, there isn't much you can do to speed up the process. You must let time pass and heal before you can function optimally. It might take a while before you can normalize.

Ask for help. Surround yourself with people who care about you. Not only will they provide support, but simply being in their company will keep you from becoming withdrawn and feeling alone in your situation.

Screen out disturbing media. Having undergone a trauma, you're in a heightened emotional state. The last thing you need is disturbing news, whether or not it's related to what you've experienced. Carefully curate what you watch, hear or read.



Try to select soothing distractions rather than those that might agitate you or stimulate associations with your trauma.

Attend to your body. Eat healthfully. Exercise. Try to get some sleep. If these tasks seem overwhelming initially, take smaller steps. Rather than trying to motivate yourself for a full workout, go outside and take a walk. Keeping your body healthy and strong is essential when you're recovering from trauma, and exercise can help mitigate anxiety. Resist the temptation to ease your pain with drugs or alcohol. Instead, try talking to a trusted friend, or, if necessary, find a support group or speak with a professional.

Distract yourself. You're lucky — dentistry is a perfect tool for distraction. The attention to fine detail required for dental procedures can help prevent repetitious, negative thoughts or rumination about your trauma. The break from reliving your trauma will benefit your mind and allow you to accomplish something useful. Allow yourself to get lost in the procedures you're doing, and challenge yourself to do your best no matter what your personal situation is at the moment.

Take control. Traumatic events activate feelings of fragility and helplessness. Luckily for you, others depend on you. You have a staff to lead, a family to support and patients to treat. Maintaining your daily routines and continuing to accept and perform your leadership responsibilities will help you regain your sense of stability and meaningfulness.

All of these suggestions should sound familiar. We advise our patients routinely, and every one of us has made similar suggestions. Life is full of emotional setbacks. But if we simply listen to our own advice, we will find ways to get through the trauma while displaying professional attitudes and behavior because we want to, we need to and we are expected to do so.

Doctor, heal thyself. ♦

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