

**COMMUNICATION AND BODY LANGUAGE SKILLS OF DENTAL PROFESSIONALS
IN DENTAL OFFICE FOR HEALTHY PATIENT- STAFF RELATIONSHIP: A REVIEW****Dr. Shazan Mohammed Khan¹ and Dr. Tahera Tarek Syed*²**

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ABSTRACT

The current review article aimed to outline some essential elements in the dentist-patient relationship regarding the interpersonal communication skills and body language of dental professionals in dental office.

KEYWORD: Communication Skills, Body Language, Dental Professionals.

INTRODUCTION

“The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn’t being said.”

-Peter F. Drucker (Educator & Writer, 1909-2005)

In this contemporary world, patient’s expectations with their dentist include not only professional skills in treatment procedures but also a high standard of communication skills, body language and individual approach.

Effective communication is a vital skill for dental professionals. It helps to contribute in improving patient satisfaction and reducing the risk of patient complaints. Good communication skill plays an important role in patient and dentist relationship and trust which leads to understanding of procedure and co-operating for the same.

I. Challenges in the dental communication field

Improper communication can be an underlying factor in a patient’s complaint. Many factors can lead to a breakdown in the communication between a patient and dental professionals for example:^[1]

➤ Physical factors

- Physical factors such as a visual or hearing impairment or learning disability which can lead to a breakdown in the communication between a patient and dental professionals.

➤ Emotional factors

- Fear, pain, agony, insecurity, and anxiety are the

accompanying features, when a patient first time visits a dental clinic, these emotions need to be addressed with a special communication approach by dental professionals.^[2]

➤ Language barriers

- Patients prefer their mother tongue when addressing any kind of pain to treating professionals. When dental staff do not speak language of patients, serious communication problems may arise which can also jeopardize patient safety and patient's experience of dental treatments. To avoid these problems verbal communication in regional language or patient's mother tongue is preferred.

II. Communication Methods: Communication can be both verbal and nonverbal. Usually, these two media of communication are parallel and exchange information at the same time.^[3]

A. Verbal communication: Verbal communication includes exchanging messages using words (written or spoken) and language.

Along with words and language, verbal communication requires the style of speaking, tone and volume of the voice, sonority, tempo, expressiveness, intonation, and pauses are important.^[2,3] Verbal communication requires speaking and listening skills. Speaking is part of everyday communication, thus the choice of words plays an important role which can make a big difference in whether a message is understood and how it is received. Also listening is an important part of the communication

process. Active listening is a form of listening that involves giving full attention to the sender and the message that he/she communicates.^[2]

B. Nonverbal communication: Nonverbal communication is based on the different types of manifestations like Gestures, Body Language and Posture, Facial expressions, Eye Gaze (eye contact), Appearance, Paralinguistic signs, Proxemics, and Haptics (physical contact, touch).^[3] It accounts for over 95% of the first impression we have on others.^[2]

i) Gestures

Gestures often stimulate thought processes, it emphasize what is going to be said. Some of the most common gestures are hand movements, head movements and so on.^[3]

ii) Body Language and Posture: Body language displays the sincerity of the person. During the conversation with a patient, the dentist should be aware of his body language and posture.^[2] The dentist's first impression is crucial and important to create a friendly and approachable first image. For example, a clean, elegant, comfortable and contemporary place, where everything is tidy, and these are combined with a warm, sincere smile and handshake creates a good first impression on the patient and helps significantly in the subsequent communication.^[2]

Many body signals represent different meanings depending on the person and the situation. For that reason, it is important to understand and know how to interpret a patient's body language. For example, if a patient clears his throat during a conversation it could be interpreted as anxiety, but it can also mean that he/she simply has a sore throat or it is just a habit.

Stress is one of the important factors that impact on body language of dentists and patients. Management of stress is important for dentists to improve nonverbal communication. Stress often leads to misreading people, which confuses nonverbal signals and reduces healthy behavior.^[2] People from different countries and cultures tend to use different nonverbal communication methods, so it's important to consider the culture, religion, gender, and emotional state of the patients when reading body language signals.^[2]

iii) Facial expressions

Facial expressions play a significant role in communication, as they are extremely good indicators of basic emotions.^[3] A smile can express interest, goodwill, sympathy, empathy, but also ridicule, sarcasm, etc. Facial expressions can calm, confirm, and draw attention to something important.^[3]

iv) Eye Gaze (eye contact)

Making eye contact is one of the most basic and important forms of nonverbal communication. The eye gaze can communicate feelings of interest, attention, respect or negative ones like hate. On the other hand, avoiding eye contact can indicate shyness, lack of attention, boredom or disrespect.^[2] Patients who avoid making eye contact with their dentist often indicate anxious behaviour or frightened with dental treatment.^[3] Some exceptions are there related with eye contact is due to cultural and religious obligations, this point has to be in mind when making an eye contact with the patients and attenders.

v) Appearance

In the first meeting, there is a need to evaluate the external appearance of the patient. Elements of external appearance, such as dressing, hair colour, jewellery and tattoos are also part of nonverbal communication.^[2]

vi) Paralinguistic signs

The paralinguistic signs are the aspects of speech that do not involve words. Some examples of paralinguistic features include intonation, rhythm, pitch, loudness, tempo, accent, voice quality, and timbre.^[3] A strong, confident voice is an essential part of effective interpersonal communication between patients and dental professionals.^[3]

The benefits of effective vocal power can project a positive image of confidence and professionalism. Variations in pitch and tempo of the dentist's voice are a particularly important source of information, as slow tempo and small variations in voice reflect positive emotions (activity, surprise, pleasant emotions). While trembling, loss of voice and stuttering convey anxiety and excitement.^[3]

vii) Proxemics

Proxemics are the role of space in behavior. The working area of dentist and supporting staff is next proximal to treating patient. In dental practice, there is physical contact with patients, which many patients feel uncomfortable and consciously or unconsciously reject treatment procedures which causes resistance behavior. That is why dentists should have good communication skills, empathy, warmth and trust on the patients are extremely important for overcoming this barrier.^[3]

viii) Haptics

Haptics or physical contact or touch is the earliest form of social communication. Haptics is the way in which people communicate and interact via the sense of touch. In dental practice, touch can be used as a means of calming the patient, as well as a means of control.^[3]

In the medical field, two main types of touch are described.^[4]

i) Instrumental touch which is deliberate, task-oriented and can be firm, gentle, aggressive, brief, long,

tolerable, or intolerable.

- ii) Expressive touch which is more spontaneous and relates to emotions.

Haptics is important in dental care for two main reasons.

First, touch can facilitate patient cooperation. For example, in most cases, a light touch on the upper arm or shoulder produced more cooperation. Second, appropriate touch can communicate such positive feelings as friendship, reassurance, comfort, concern, and care with patients.^[4]

During dental treatments, we can use positive touch to help our patients especially children and elders. We can ask an ungloved dental staff person, to hold the hand of an apprehensive patient.^[4]

CONCLUSION

Effective communication and body language skills of dental professionals play a positive role in developing trust in patients. Once trust is attained, treatment plans and procedures are approved and done smoothly. Communicating in the regional language or patient's mother tongue plays an important role in the dentist-patient relationship. A good interpersonal relationship is a pre-requisite for optimal dental care. Averting, malpractice and judicial recrimination, interpersonal communication plays an important role and dental procedures have therapeutic effects on patients.

Anxiety is part and parcel of walk-in dental patients. Dental staff cooperation with apprehensive patients will reduce the level of anxiety and increase the trust of the patients in the prescribed procedures. Here, the role of dental professionals with basics of psychology acts as an added advantage to interpersonal relationships or good communication skills between dentists and patients.

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