

The Pursuit of Happiness

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I once thought that simply making people feel better would make them happy. How dumb was that perception? I was naïve, but not impossible to teach. One of my first lessons in "helping" people was as a neophyte chiropractor working in a preceptorship in the office of one my first chiropractic mentors.

"Old Doc" had treated a particular female patient for several years. The first time I met her was when her husband had to practically carry her into the office and lift her onto the treatment table. I couldn't guess her age (probably not yet 60), but she looked so fragile, and was clearly suffering greatly. Old Doc calmed her down, gently moved her around on the table, and soon the two left, ambulatory and seemingly happier. I was impressed.

"Don't be," Old Doc warned me. "She's been punishing that guy since he cheated on her 20 years ago. One indiscretion, and forever in hell. She does have a bad back, but not that bad. Having these severe flare-ups is her way of making him take care of her, that's all."

My understanding came slowly. Just helping people get well might not be enough to make some of them happy. But I didn't want patients to be unhappy with me, so I began to learn what I could do to keep them cheery.

One thing that seems to keep people happy is carrying a drink around. Coffee, iced tea, juice, anything in a cup or bottle. Like calves seeking contentment from an existential cow, a drink seems to comfort folks. One patient says she cannot drive one mile without a large iced tea with her, which is better than a large can of malt liquor, I suppose.

What also seems to make patients happy is not waiting too long. As opposed to those few patients who enjoy standing at the front counter, monopolizing my receptionist's time, most people have a life. They have other things to do, like work for a living.

Patience is variable. One guy walked out after 15 minutes of waiting. What was he thinking? Was he upset, or just scheduled "too tight"? Did something happen in his upbringing that made him sensitive to authority? Was he abandoned as a child? New patients come to us with certain expectations, and if we waiver ... well, anything might come forth.

Patients can get nervous, fettered by their tight schedules. They have to leave five minutes ago. "I've got 12 CostCo frozen pizzas in the car, and they're going to thaw!" or "My Irish wolfhound is in the car, and he's going to get too hot!" How fast must I adjust a patient to get them out the door? I can do "fast-track" adjusting, just like the way I adjust my wife. But no matter how panicked any patient seems to be when I enter the treatment room, they seem to expect the same time and effort I always give them. So really, how thawed or hot are the pizzas and wolfhound, anyway?

Another thing that periodically makes patients happy is helping them with their insurance problems. If billing is done in the chiropractic office, people know they can "vent" right there, instead of over the phone to a customer service rep in India. And frustration with Medicare is the worst, mostly because seniors have extra time on their hands, trying to "crack the code" on the

explanation of benefits (EOBs) sent to them. "My Medicare secondary insurance should be covering this co-payment!" a senior might complain. "But Mrs. Kopopkins, you don't have a secondary insurance carrier!" my staff person might answer.

I have learned that happiness is different than satisfaction. Patients are not happy to be in pain and they're not happy spending money to get out of pain. Patient satisfaction is really what we're after, and if achieved ... well, I hope at least *we're* happy.

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