Peer Support, Vulnerability and Optimal Growth

By: Jenelle Fleagle, DDS

Treating special needs patients has unique challenges with increasing complexity both in the clinical and hospital setting. Often dentistry creates feelings of isolation even among our dental colleagues who treat differing complexity of patients. Years ago, I had the opportunity to primarily care for complex special needs patients in the hospital. During this time, I had a medically complex patient die during a procedure in the OR. It became a difficult time for me. I spoke to my medical colleagues which provided some support, however, when speaking to my dental colleagues I found a lack of understanding. I desperately began “googling” for dental support because surely, I could not have been the only general dentist who lost a patient during a procedure outside of my control. I found the SCDA organization and signed up for the next meeting. I drove to Chicago for my first SCDA meeting. I went to the newbie breakfast and was ecstatic to find people like myself treating special needs and medically complex patients from all over the world. I joined the Hospital Council and found support from seasoned practitioners. I ultimately began healing and was able to take on more challenges, encourage practitioners who felt alone, and take steps to further my career. Why am I talking about this? The purpose is we need to support each other more than ever right now. We need to challenge ourselves to be vulnerable because that is how we will grow and ultimately better support our work and home life.

It is paramount during the COVID-19 pandemic to continue social connections and provide opportunities for communication and support. We now find ourselves navigating through new regulations, fears from our patients and staff, decreasing funds, and the unknown. Not only are we worried about our patients and struggle when caregivers call in desperation to receive treatment for their loved ones, we also have our own families to provide for both emotionally and
financially. We face new uncertainty in health care, uncertainty with school and family planning, changes in our daily workflow or work/life balance, fewer opportunities for social connections, and a financial business impact. Our wellbeing may become negatively affected resulting in disruption of our emotional health, personal relationships, work and home life, or even second victim syndrome which may be experienced by providers after a traumatic event. We may develop anxiety and feelings of guilt that without peer support and/or counseling will lead to feelings of isolation, burn-out, PSTD by retriggering of events, and, unfortunately, suicide. According to the CDC, suicide and drug-overdose rates are the highest they have been since WWII and 11% of US adults seriously considered suicide this June.

Right now, more than ever, reaching out for peer support, which may take only a 10-minute phone call with an understanding colleague, is so important. I found SCDA at a time I felt isolated and ultimately burn-out from my job. Whether you are struggling with isolation, financial compromise, feelings of guilt, difficulty in family planning, or even recovery from COVID-19 – you are not alone. It is important to find confidential support, become vulnerable which leads to optimal growth. As an organization, stay involved – don’t detach from others, and remember whatever you are going through, it is not the end. Maya Angelou once said “People will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel”. Whether you need support or are providing support during this time, remember we are in this together and becoming vulnerable by seeking help is not weakness but strength. We will succeed. We are not a mere statistic – we are much more than that.

There is still time to register for the Virtual 32nd Annual Meeting! Click here for more information and registration.

Do you have a tip to add to this list? Email Dennis BozziDennis@scdaonline.org