

Scroll, scroll like... Scroll, scroll think... Scroll, scroll off...Brush and sink

This article from Anthony Asquith Psychotherapist and behavioural expert in dentistry, examines the interesting and unusual ways of influencing the behaviour of younger patients using nudge technique, motivational questioning and neuro-linguistic programming

Different patients have a variety of requirements based on their preferences, upbringing, personality types and especially interestingly, the period of time in which they were born.

The centennials also known as generation Z were first born in 1995 and are in 2021, now emerging with their own finances, expectations and preferences so, ensuring you communicate the right way is essential. They're social media savvy, Instagram being a favoured platform although others are available, scrolling ravenously up to 300ft daily whilst enjoying the world of direct messaging. They're mental multi-taskers on their mobile devices and are expecting a download of your website page in 1-2 seconds or they're off. That said, despite their reliance on the virtual world, they also strongly value face to face discussions with their care providers.

So, where to start with communication, influence and behaviour change?

Applying the **AIDA** concept of marketing (**Attention, Interest, Desire and Action**)

Think about their world for a moment, in the lockdown, they may be living alone, with friends or under the roof of their parental nest. If they're struggling with employment right now as many are, stress levels are high, late night snacking for emotional comfort eating could be part of their regime. The danger here is that eating too much processed food and sugary energy drinks will in the longer-term detrimental health effect.

Encouraging them to take stock of the foods and drinks they are consuming is a dental health priority. Afterall, the patients you're working with don't pack on the pounds or develop tooth decay overnight, this is done over time.

So how do you get this across without coming over as their nagging patriarchal elder?

Attention/Interest.... There's a great book called **The Slight Edge** by **Jeff Olsen** in which he talks about the small daily habits you have either positive or detrimental, make very little or no daily difference to your well-being. However, if that time-period is expanded into weeks, months and over several years the detrimental or positive implications will have an impact and this is very true of your oral health and overall physical well-being.

I am a hypnotist by trade and profession so, how would I go about priming someone to think smart phone off, brush and sink? I'd ask a number of solution focused questions to start with in order to build their **Desire**.

There are several variations and I'd certainly use two or three of them as part of an ongoing conversation to build their desire further

‘What would your teeth look like a year or two from now, if you, began today to choose better health and good nutrition over quick fix, processed foods and sugary drinks?’

‘How would your future self-thank you for remembering to brush twice daily or remembering to keep the retainer in for longer periods of time in the way we showed you?’

‘What advice could your future healthier self-offer you today about how to maintain a better-balanced choice of healthier foods?’

‘What foods did your future self-consume that will make you feel good from today?’

Some patients will look at you, pause a moment or two and say ‘Oh I don’t know...’ Don’t worry that’s common and I’d smile and say something like ‘Just supposing you did know then, what would your future self-tell you about making healthier food and drink choices? Don’t shy away from pushing them on these questions, they get patients thinking, in a more nuanced, positive manner and therein lies the start of a desire to act.

They will look at you for a moment and take a pause, while considering the question and answer.



Image credit www.hazelgale.medium.com

Watch how their eyes go either soft focus or up (Visual). Down right (Kinaesthetic) feelings and emotional responses or Horizontally (Audio) as they access unconscious responses in their brain about how they would initially see the image of themselves 5 years from now.

Having accessed this unconscious response, they begin talking about what they mentally can see, feel or hear inside their own mind. This is now where they are thinking for themselves and you aren’t telling them what to do. It’s helping them think through the process then in their own words, they outline what is in their mind using their solution focused future self - driven imagination.

This will often reveal too other strong motivational information allowing perhaps for a broader discussion which in turn, opens the door for **(Action)**. ‘Well now, do you want to go for it today, shall I help you along the way too?’

This population of youngsters need a stable mind and heart to carry forth their life goals and out in the world, doing formidable things will require a healthy formidable body.

Nudge Technique to influence behaviour change.

‘Stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives’ Are familiar slogans that we’ve become accustomed to especially in the early days of the pandemic. They’re used for a reason, because they’re unambiguous, easy to understand in a world of uncertainty and ambiguity. It would also be fair to say that they contained a degree of psychological stickiness too. ‘Nudge theory’ is based on the research of behavioural economists who noted humans have neurological and psychological biases that exist in our thinking. These biases cause people to sometimes make decisions which are outside of their own conscious awareness and even contrary to their best interests. The use of nudging techniques by the UK government in conjunction with the Behavioural Insights Team has been going on a few years now and shows that it is indeed possible to steer people towards better decisions by presenting choice in a variety of differing and interesting ways.

Rewarding the patients best attempts at Oral hygiene works well, mentioning ‘I can see that you have really been trying to keep their teeth clean but...’ This must be replaced with the word ‘And...’ ‘And all these good efforts will be even more effective when you spend another 30 seconds brushing more slowly like this, on the back left hand side’ (Obviously showing them the brushing actions as you do this for them)

Consider the variety of lifestyles that are in this age group. Youthful people are often busy, caught up in trying to meet the demands of their teachers, friends, parents and possibly employers and because of this, caring routinely for their own oral health can go by the wayside. Here’s how one of my friend’s daughters portrayed this for me. ‘Imagine getting in from work and dinner beckons followed by a few evening snacks.’ ‘Watching Netflix for a bit and then getting on the phone to my friends, having already climbed into bed.’ ‘I know that I need to brush my teeth but it’s something to be done later. Later comes and so does sleep.’ ‘I may wake up with the bedroom lights still on, still with my make-up on and it’s 2.00am the idea of washing my teeth long gone as I am so comfortable and drift off again.’ (Remember the Slight Edge concept)

Whilst brushing and flossing twice daily are rules of thumb, for not only the Centennials but other generations as well, some people have a mindset of rules are meant to be broken too.

Here's a few nice examples of gentle dental nudge techniques that can be applied to centennials or just about anybody else who comes your way.

When faced with a non-compliant patient remember this, I have a wonderful Romanian dentist friend. Chip my friend, told me this about one of his friends, a professor at Bucharest Dental School, who said from time to time his students would ask him the following. ‘Our patients have up to 32 teeth and 34 cavities around them and not all these are immediately visible or even obvious. How can we motivate them to spend time flossing and cleaning properly, especially when people often lead busy lives? He replied ‘Simply tell them to only floss the teeth they want to keep.’

Equally helpful in this context is when a patient asks you 'Do I need to wear this appliance forever? The norm might be to say yes you will need to wear the aligner all of your life. A better spin on that would be (Remembering to smile) 'Mr Reece that's right, you only need to wear the aligner for as long as you want straight white teeth and a lovely smile.' Everyone wants to keep their teeth and everyone wants to have straight white smiles however the immediacy of life and psychological biases I mentioned earlier can sometimes thwart this intent unless the delivery of the message is obvious and impactful to the individual.

Another example in completing this article which is one of the easiest little wins in lockdown is the mirror, mirror trick. Place a large mirror behind your reception desk where patients can see themselves and quickly notice the way in which their behaviour alters. It would seem that we all want to come across to others as being good people therefore, a mirror reflects back to us how the world actually sees us and funny thing is suddenly people's behaviours at the reception desk improves they're less likely to become impatient or act in a rude manner.

Anthony Asquith is a psychotherapist offering life-long learning courses teaching dental professionals how to communicate, collaborate and connect so that they stand out and win trust with colleagues and patients. He can be contacted by email at anthony@dentcomtraining.co.uk and his website is www.dentcomtraining.co.uk