

Reassessing Routines

The majority of life is spent dealing with everyday events; short-term, routine aspects of just getting through the day. Although we plan for the mid-term concerns of family, business, financial and social elements—we do so in the framework of the daily routine. Even when we make major, long-term, more onerous decisions that are of much greater consequence, impacting on our families and life itself, these long-term plans are made while dealing with the present exigencies of life. We tend to settle into routines whereby we can more effortlessly conduct our business and find time for life's pleasures. We find ways to avoid conflict and ease the course of our daily movement. Most of us are inclined to follow the same procedures of starting our day, selecting our food, getting to work, returning home, and, finally, retiring to bed at night. Even recreation and relaxation may be almost habitual. Our family relationships develop a pattern—and our behavior is often very predictable to those around us. These routines are comfortable, often efficient, and avoid the stress of having to deal with novel situations. They are often accomplished with a minimum of conscious effort and are a rather mindless repetition of learned behaviors.

We may also enter into routines in our professional lives, using treatment procedures with which we are more familiar and through which we can practice competently. Some routines are desirable, creating a methodical, efficient method of attending to detail. Other routines preclude learning newer procedures, preferring the comfort of the known to the challenge of the new. Learning new procedures is sometimes irritating and may possibly even be feared. The unknown can be an awesome enemy.

Frequently, as this routine becomes increasingly rigid, we tend to overlook some of the more important relationships that are evolving. The fact that threads of a routine are woven one at a time may cause us to momentarily overlook the fabric that is coming from our life's loom. When there is a significant interruption to this routine we may be forced to reevaluate our priorities and detour from the path we have been following.

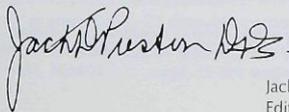
In Los Angeles, this "significant interruption" occurred recently in the form of an earthquake. To some it was catastrophic, to nearly all it was a major incident that literally jared us from our routine. To those of us who escaped with minimal physical damage, it was a sudden reminder of the frailty of our existence and a challenge to our illusion of immortality. Everyone has some such challenge, be it illness, the death of a loved one, financial reversal, or some display of the violence of nature. Prolonged cold or heat, rains, floods, hurricanes, and other demonstrations of the

natural power all capture our attention, but the lack of predictability and the suddenness of the impact of an earthquake make it unique. Part of the aftershock of this event was the necessity to alter routines—and to reevaluate those that had evolved. Some of these alterations were mandatory (a fallen freeway is difficult to ignore) while other changes were elicited merely because becoming aware of the routine made change desirable.

One benefit of this tragedy was being made aware of the frailty of our physical surroundings. For example, many dental offices routinely use computers as a business platform and have developed good habits of using backup tapes to offset any emergency. The fallacy of storing such tapes on site was exposed when entire buildings were lost, with no opportunity to retrieve records or backup tapes. While this was painful to a few, it served as a lesson that the more fortunate may learn vicariously. When one is without the basic utilities (electricity, water, telephone, gas), the priority of use of such services becomes established (one does not *need* to bathe twice daily). Sometimes one need merely be reminded that the freedom to complain, and the physical ability to do so, are, in themselves, luxuries for which we should be thankful.

Another great benefit has been the awareness of the marvelous network of friendships that has evolved from the intimacy of our profession and the international relations we enjoy. We received calls from around the world expressing care and support. These were more appreciated than I can say, and they reinforce my feeling that we are blessed with a unique group of human beings in prosthodontics.

It shouldn't take a tragedy to effect reassessment and revision of the repetitive nature of our lives. Personally, this reassessment has been ongoing and progressive since the tremor. I encourage the reader to reevaluate the routines that have become so natural and to challenge each of them as to their desirability and efficacy. Possibly, it is time to re-etch some of the neural pathways that dictate our daily habits. It should not take a calamity to make us realize what a great gift friends are and to be grateful for personal relationships. After all, when values are placed on everything around us, the audit will show that warm friendships with caring people are the only true treasures.



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