



# Emotional Health and the Dentist

ONE IN A SERIES OF SIX ARTICLES

by Paul H. Earley, M.D., FASAM

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are constantly assailed by news, advertisements and warnings about our physical health. One moment we read news reports asserting that cold water fish will save us from heart disease. Later that same month we are told to decrease fish in our diet due to concerns about mercury. We worry about our diet and exercise, the medications we take and the results of our latest biopsy. Medicine has helped us live longer and longer, but as we age, our species becomes more and more preoccupied with our physical health.

But what about the other side of the coin, our emotional health? How well do we understand emotional health and psychological wellness—this other aspect of being human? For the majority of us, the answer is “not very well.” Like the news about our physical health, information about emotional well-being is everywhere. Despite its omnipresence, our understanding of emotional health is deeply contradictory and confusing. Most of us acknowledge that we should pay attention to our emotional needs. We also accept the concept that our emotional well-being is deeply intertwined with our physical health, each affecting the other. Couples who are emotionally connected in their relationships enjoy better physical health, for example. Individuals who have severe, long-standing depression often develop cognitive difficulties as their depression worsens. Patients who develop cancer have a better prognosis if they remain realistic and at the same time upbeat.

Despite the plethora of confusing information about emotional wellness, its central tenets are simple. Emotional health is produced by three key factors. The first factor comes from the quality of our relationships. People who experience emotional well-being have multiple, rich interpersonal bonds that connect them to their family, friends and community. The second factor is balance. Emotionally healthy individuals have a wide variety of work, hobbies, play, exercise and spiritual pursuits. Each of these elements interacts with the others creating the full spectrum of a healthy life. The third, and possibly the most important factor, is how we view our lives and our place in them. Our lives are best if we are not at constantly at odds with it. People who are fully engaged in their lives and yet can approach each challenge with flexibility and an open heart quickly find peace at each twist and turn.

As we enter the “caring professions,” we dedicate our lives to a higher calling. We focus on the needs of others over our own. We spend our professional day listening to and caring for others. We hear our patients’ concerns and attempt to address each one to a satisfactory outcome. Along the way, however, many of us lose sight of our own needs. Our practice becomes busy and pressure mounts. We find ourselves troubleshooting the practice and its complexities while continuing to provide quality care. At the end of our professional day we return home to our families. They too have their needs. Who has the time or energy for self-care?

When we enter professional training, the pressures are high. There is an enormous amount of technical learning, a natural training competition and the pressure to succeed. Medical and dental training places a high value on technical and intellectual expertise. Training programs provide no education on emotional intelligence and balance. We dismiss our emotional needs as less important than intellectual rigor. Some of us become intellectual snobs, believing that our well-honed intellectual training supersedes our emotional self, rendering it unimportant.

To illustrate these issues in this article series, we will follow the life of Noah Marshall, a 47-year-old dentist with a general practice in a moderate-sized Canadian town. Noah grew up in a nuclear family comprising a father, mother, two sisters and a live-in grandparent. From an early age, his family and school recognized his drive and solid intellectual skills. Noah's home life was troubled. His father drank excessively during his early childhood, sometimes disappearing for a day or two in an alcoholic binge. When he was home and not drinking, his hard-working father ruled over his children with an iron fist. He encouraged his son's schooling so Noah could "make a better life for himself." In high school, Noah worked several jobs in order to save for his future. Noah matriculated into an excellent college, made good grades and entered a prestigious dental training program.

In dental school Noah met Jeanne, his future wife. Noah's professors encouraged him to consider an academic career. Noah and Jeanne planned for such a future and married during his fourth year of dental school. Their immediate pregnancy altered that plan. They agreed that it might be best for their family to move closer to Jeanne's large family in another province. Noah was secretly upset about the changes in plan, but he agreed to the wisdom of an extended network of support for their fledgling family. When Noah completed his training, he found a position in a general dentistry practice in Jeanne's hometown.

***In our second of six installments, we will follow Noah and his family as they learn the importance of emotional health in their lives. Stay tuned for Noah's challenges and turmoil as he negotiates his family life and career.***

## **CDRAF AND CDA JOINT PROJECT**

The development and distribution of this article is a joint project with the Canadian Dental Regulatory Authorities Federation (CDRAF) and the Canadian Dental Association (CDA). The goal of the project is to raise awareness of dentists in Canada about addiction disease and the opportunities for treatment and recovery. Dr. Earley was a keynote speaker at the national symposium collaboratively organized by CDRAF and CDA held in Toronto in October 2011 to profile addiction for the organizations' leadership.

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Dr. Earley has been an Addiction Medicine Physician for more than 25 years. Over his career, he has treated all types of addictive disorders and specializes in the assessment and treatment of health care professionals. As a therapist, he works with patients already in recovery, providing long-term therapy for those who suffer from this disease. His professional expertise extends to advocacy for professionals before agencies and licensing boards.

Dr. Earley is the Medical Director of the Georgia Professionals Health Program, Inc., the Physicians Health Program for the state of Georgia in the United States. He is also a consultant to numerous treatment agencies regarding treatment effectiveness and staff development.

Dr. Earley speaks nationally and internationally on topics of addiction, its treatment and addiction among health care professionals. He is the author of numerous books and articles on addiction and its treatment, including *The Cocaine Recovery Book*. He is one of the authors of the American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) Textbook: *Principles of Addiction Medicine*, including the chapter, "Physician Health Programs and Addiction among Physicians." His work was featured in the documentary series on addiction entitled *Close to Home* by Bill Moyers. He has championed recovery in two appearances on the Oprah Winfrey show. Dr. Earley is a Fellow of ASAM and has been on the board of ASAM for over 10 years in several capacities. He has also served as the Medical Director of two nationally acclaimed addiction programs specializing in the care of addicted health care professionals.