

12 Things I Wish I Knew Before I Became a Dentist

Get ready for everyone to constantly tell you how much they hate dentists.



As Told To Arielle Pardes May 17, 2016

1. People will constantly tell you, "I hate dentists." Going to the dentist doesn't have to be a painful experience, but often, people associate dentistry with times they've been in a lot of pain or felt really anxious. It can be really hard not to take it personally. I try to view it as a personal challenge to make my patients' dental experiences so relaxing — by keeping our office space very "zen" and by creating a personal relationship with each of my patients — that I can convert them from people who hate dentists into people who love coming to see me. Which brings me to...

2. Your dental work doesn't make much of a difference if your patients are too terrified to come in. Most people are scared of the dentist — and I get it, because I was scared of the dentist too, before I became one. It's so important to make your patients as comfortable as possible; otherwise they won't make an appointment with you until something is seriously wrong. At our office, we have a massage chair for patients to relax in before and after their appointments, and we have movie goggles so people can watch a film while they're getting more extensive work done.

3. Dental school is a huge investment, so make sure you want to be a dentist before you enroll. I know people who went through all four years of dental school, got their diploma, and then after one or two years of working as a dentist, they quit because they realized they hated the job. And dental school is as expensive as medical school, so, not cheap. The retention rate for dentists is lower than other medical fields, which is why there may be a "dentist shortage" right now. I think it's a good idea to work in a dentist's office as an assistant before you enroll, because it's a huge waste if you don't actually end up becoming a dentist.

4. You will start noticing everyone's teeth. It starts to feel like second nature to look into peoples' mouths. When I first meet someone, the first thing I notice is their smile. I actually stare into their mouth while they're talking, checking out their

gums and how straight their teeth are. If someone opens their mouth while laughing, I'm definitely going to look at their molars too.

5. The front office receptionist can make or break your reputation. You can be the best dentist in the world, but no one will come to see you if they don't like the people who work in your front office. The people who work in the front office make the first impression of your office — if they're rude on the phone, the patient is going to hang up without making an appointment — so I make sure everyone on my staff smiles, greets patients warmly, and offers to help make patients comfortable in any way they can.

6. It can be difficult to make people take their dental care seriously. Dental health affects your whole body. If you have gum disease, for example, the bacteria can get into your bloodstream and it can ultimately kill you. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggests almost one-third of Americans have untreated cavities, but they don't come to see a dentist because they don't think it's a big deal. Ninety-nine percent of dental health is the patient's responsibility. I can save someone's teeth when they visit me in the office, but if they don't take care of it when they go home, the situation will go back to where it started. I have to talk to patients every single time they come in to underscore how important it is to keep up with their cleanings, at home and in the office.

7. Dental equipment can be very dangerous, so you have to be super careful. If someone jerks in their chair because they're nervous, it can be easy to accidentally hurt them. Fortunately, that's never happened to me, but I've heard of cases where a dentist accidentally clipped someone's tongue with a dental instrument — and as the dentist, you are 100 percent liable for those kinds of injuries, even if it was caused by the patient squirming. That's another reason you want to make your patients as comfortable as possible: If they're relaxed, they're less likely to move around, and you're less likely to accidentally hurt them.

8. There are pros and cons to working for yourself. I worked for a dental group for two years, and now I own my own practice. I think sometimes dentists in dental groups are just interested in the paycheck. I prefer working for myself, because I feel more of a personal connection to my patients and there's more flexibility overall. That said, overhead is very expensive. You have to pay for complex machinery as well as disposable supplies, and it gets really pricey. Dental chairs run \$10,000 minimum each, and the disposable supplies and instruments cost about \$6,000 each month. You also need to pay for your office space, malpractice insurance, and the salaries of all your employees. I still make more working for myself than I did at a dental group though.

9. A lot of dentists have back and neck issues. Regardless of the dental procedure, you're usually in the same position hovering over the patient. I recently started having really severe lower back pain, after working on a patient who needed a full mouth reconstruction from going through chemotherapy, which messes up your teeth. I was sitting in one position working on her for hours. I've also seen patients who had decay on every single tooth and needed root canals on most of them. Those procedures can be very taxing on *your* body too. Now, I do yoga for my back, and that's helping.

10. Dental insurance will also be a pain in your neck. In most cases, the amount an insurance company will pay barely covers the dental procedure. That forces some dentists to use cheaper labor and cheaper equipment in order to get more out of the insurance reimbursement. I didn't want to do that, so my office only accepts one type of dental insurance.

11. Generally speaking, dentists have a very high rate of dissatisfaction. There's a well-known statistic that dentists have an extremely high rate of suicide. And while I'm genuinely very happy with the work I do, I understand why other dentists aren't. The work we do is very stressful. It's physically exhausting, and it's emotionally exhausting too, since you're dealing with anxious patients all day. You're looking at rotten teeth all day and listening to the sound of teeth scraping (you get used to it). It's also pretty common for dentists to feel "burned out," so it's important to surround yourself with great staff and give yourself time off when you need it.

12. Even if people hate coming in, it's worth it when they leave smiling. I decided to become a dentist because I wanted to help people smile more. I know that sounds cheesy, but it's so rewarding to see people leave happy — whether they came in to get a crown or to get their teeth whitened. When you can relieve your patients of pain *and* help them feel better about their smile, it feels really good.