Is patient care affected by the personality interaction between the doctor and patient? Should the case presentation be modified based on the personality of the patient? Does the personality of our staff members affect job performance? Would some personalities perform better in some jobs and worse in others? The answer to all these questions is yes.

Personality can be defined as “…a collection of emotional, thought and behavioral patterns unique to a person that is consistent over time.” People are different. Different people have different personalities. From the ancient Greeks onward, many systems emerged over time as attempts to classify personality. Examples range from Hippocrates (Choleric, Sanguine, Phlagmatic, Melancholy) to Myers-Briggs (extroversion-introversion, intuition-sensing, thinking-feeling and perceiving-judging).

More recently, LaHay and Littauer updated the Hippocrates model to Powerful, Popular, Peaceful and Perfect. This article utilizes the updated Hippocrates model with a change calling the Popular personality Playful.

Powerful personalities are: competitive, resourceful, self-reliant, optimistic, forceful, independent, productive, bossy, unsympathetic, argumentative, short-tempered and impatient. Powerful personalities want achievement and appreciation from other people. Powerfuls take charge because they are natural born leaders. Powerfuls tend to overlook details and ignore rules to reach achievement. Powerfuls tend to achieve more in a shorter period of time than other personalities. Powerfuls tend to make decisions quickly then move rapidly to implementation. Because Powerfuls are interested in getting things done, they tend to tell other people what to do expecting them to be thankful for the direction and guidance. Powerfuls also tend to care more about getting things done than about people’s feelings. Powerfuls love change.

Characteristics of Playful personalities are: popular, sociable, spirited, spontaneous, unpredictable, talkative, disorganized, inconsistent, easily angered and loud. Playful personalities want attention and approval from other people. When a Playful does not receive attention, it is not unusual for them to move away both mentally and physically in search of an audience. Playfuls are the life of the party – they are fun people to be around. Since people matter more to a Playful than tasks, the result is Playfuls do not always get work done efficiently. Playfuls tend to procrastinate. Playfuls are story tellers, full of energy and when talking must touch the other person.

People with Peaceful personalities are: adaptable, submissive, reserved, controlled, compromising, fearful, hesitant, indecisive, shy and worryers. Peaceful personalities want respect and a feeling of worth. Peacefuls are loyal. A Peaceful staff member will be with you forever. Peacefuls are low key, calm, cool and collected. Peacefuls tend to please. Peacefuls are not in a hurry, they are sympathetic and kind. Peacefuls achieve, however, achievement is not a priority. Peacefuls work on their own time frame. Peacefuls avoid conflict at almost any cost.

The Perfect personality characteristics are: analytical,
detailed, persistent, considerate, respectful, sensitive, orderly, scheduled, faithful, deep, idealistic, pessimistic, unforgiving, fussy, skeptical and depressed. Perfect personalities want order and sensitivity from other people. Perfects are detail oriented and get things done. Perfects love lists and schedules. Perfects are very respectful and aware of time. Perfects often have difficulty making decisions because they get lost in details and in analysis. Because they invest so much in details and analysis, Perfects tend to believe they are right even when they are wrong. Perfects are super-sensitive people and will hold a grudge forever. Perfects do not like change. Perfects are neat and tidy.

Many tests exist to identify personality types, however, in the busy flow of a practice it is not practical to administer personality tests to patients. Instead, watching and listening to patients gives an acceptable level of insight into personality. If at first you do not accurately identify the correct personality of every patient, watching reactions to ongoing communications will help further refine initial impressions.

Powerfuls are not interested in details but Perfects love details. Peacefuls and Playfuls both want to please but in very different ways. In an effort to please, patients with a Peaceful personality may give you false information and even agree with a treatment plan in the office when there is no desire to really implement. Playfuls and Powerfuls are optimists while Peacefuls and Perfects are pessimists. The Playful is a talker, the Perfect is a thinker, the Powerful is a doer and the Peaceful is a watcher. Because each personality is different, the approach to each patient in the exam room, dispensary and therapy room should match the personality of the patient. It is incumbent on the doctor and staff to understand and adapt to the patient’s personality rather than the other way around.

Consider a Powerful doctor giving a case presentation to a Perfect patient. The Powerful doctor wants to jump over the details and get to the action plan, while the Perfect patient is waiting for the details and does not want to make a decision until all the details have been carefully presented and analyzed. The Powerful doctor should suppress the desire to jump to the action plan and instead take time to lay out all the details of the case for the Perfect patient. The Powerful doctor should enhance the presentation for the Perfect patient by making lists. The Powerful doctor needs to acknowledge the Perfect patient’s analysis of the situation making sure to not dismiss anything said by the Perfect. And, remembering the Perfect is time bound, the Powerful doctor needs to be on time for the exam.

Consider a Perfect doctor giving a case presentation to a Peaceful patient. The Perfect doctor wants to deliver all the details and all the analysis to the patient. The Peaceful patient is a listener by nature however the overwhelming delivery of details and analysis will feed indecision and fearfulness. It is not unusual for a Peaceful patient to accept the treatment plan to avoid conflict with the doctor but never follow through. The Peaceful patient will be obliging and friendly while at the same time unenthusiastic and hesitant. Without understanding the Peaceful personality, the Perfect doctor will be frustrated by the Peaceful patient’s sluggishness.

Here are some staff issues to consider in the context of personalities. What should be the personality of the staff member who meets and greets patients entering the practice? How do you handle the Playful optician who is fun in the dispensary but procrastinates in placing patient orders? How do you handle the Perfect therapist who wants to explain everything about every therapy procedure? How do you address problems with a Peaceful staff member with a core personality that avoids conflict at all costs?

Understanding the four personalities helps answer these issues. The Playful will be the most popular greeter in the practice, while the Playful optician needs a Perfect helper to get the orders in on time, the Perfect vision therapist will have a hard time understanding that others do not want detail, and the manger of the Peaceful needs to utilize non-confrontational techniques as described in the book Whale Done.3

Providing the best care to every patient seen is always our goal. Being sensitive to personalities helps doctors and staff better communicate with each other and with patients. The result will be better care for each patient seen. Identify your own primary personality mode. For even better insight, identify your secondary personality mode as well. Do the same for your staff and do the same for the next 20 patients you see. Try communicating with each personality following their strengths and watch positive change in patient care occur.

References