What the Match taught me about wants vs. needs

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“You can’t always get what you want
But if you try sometimes you just might find
You get what you need.”
—The Rolling Stones

I DID NOT MATCH into residency in the most recent application cycle. Imagine the irony as I compose the editorial for our special residency issue of Contour. What can I—the failed applicant—share with our readers about residency? Rather than speak directly to residency applications, I can offer some thoughts on disappointment that should resonate no matter your plans after graduation.

Let’s start with my Match Day result: No Match.

Initially, I succumbed to a deluge of embarrassment, disappointment, confusion and panic all layered over the feeling of rejection. I replayed the journey of my application, my interviews and my performance through dental school over and over again in my mind. What did I do wrong? I wanted this so badly.

The head games were maddening for a couple of days, and I was frustrated with dental school. I did not want to show up to class or clinic to break the news to classmates and faculty. I felt like I let them down as much as myself. But then I took a deep breath and stepped back. I was so disappointed by the death of my dream that I had failed to see what was more important: my needs.

How could I have forgotten that? Especially because I have faced harder challenges before. It is wild how disappointment can cloud your perspective and make you forget life lessons you’ve already learned. Here’s the life lesson I go back to in times of struggle.

During my second year of dental school, I was diagnosed with tracheal cancer. My first instinct was confusion, alarm, frustration and sadness. I gave in to my emotions. I went through the biopsies, PET scans and CT scans to gather more information, and all I wanted was to snap out of it like a bad dream. I didn’t embrace what was ahead at first. I pushed it away because it certainly wasn’t what I wanted—not for myself or anyone else. I just wanted to get better instantly and move on. I just wanted to get through dental school like other students, with as few speed bumps as possible. I didn’t want this.

But while I was focused on what I wanted, my family and friends gave me what I needed: unconditional kindness, smiling greetings, hope, trust. In retrospect, I can see where my wants and my needs were intertwined in an unexpected way.

There was the balancing act of keeping it quiet from most of my peers at campus. Call it fear, introversion or just a lack of readiness. There was the shuffling between tests, appointments and treatments and then showing up to the dental clinic even though I was exhausted and distracted. But I was fortunate to continue attending dental school, as we elected a treatment course that would not remove me from a large timeframe of my studies.

I’m grateful to be healthy as I write to you today.

Looking back, I ultimately got what I wanted: health. However, not before I had received what I really needed: support and a new perspective. Those things came first, as fate would have it, and they were the result of this unexpected detour in my life.

As we circle back to my present disappointment, I just have to shake my head at the way I reacted to not matching. A residency rejection wasn’t what I wanted, but I know I can learn from it.

Perhaps we need to be pushed toward change. Perhaps we don’t always see what is best for ourselves. Perhaps we need struggles to understand that the world won’t end when things fail to transpire according to plan.

We should all respect that our wants and needs aren’t always the same. I’d say that our wants are often things of the present, and our needs are the long game. We just need to remind ourselves of that.

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Oversaturation \infatuation

THERE ARE TOO MANY dentists these days. The market is becoming oversaturated. Or is it? Is this “fake news” or is there some truth to that statement? Depending on who you ask, you may get different answers.

If you read enough Student Doctor Network threads or shadow enough dentists you may hear the warning: “Don’t do dentistry. The market isn’t what it used to be.” If you follow U.S. News & World Report’s Best Jobs rankings each year, you might think that there has never been a better time to become a dentist. In 2017, U.S. News & World Report ranked dentist as the No. 1 job, while in 2016 it was No. 2 (behind orthodontist). Dentistry was No. 1 in 2015, No. 3 in 2014 and back at No. 1 in 2013. You get the point—dentistry rocks. But how do they develop their rankings? Is market saturation a consideration?

Yes. As it turns out, the demand for dentists and overall job prospects are major factors in their rankings. In 2013, U.S. News & World Report wrote that the demand for dentists “isn’t fading” and that with the increased desire for cosmetic dentistry, “the demand for dentists is growing.” However, they have consistently rated dentistry’s job market and future growth, two categories they use to determine the overall job ranking, as only a 6/10. To determine that score, they used unemployment rate, 10-year growth volume, 10-year growth percentage and future job prospects as determining factors. On their scale, a 6/10 generally ranks as slightly above average. U.S. News & World Report may think dentistry is a “fantastic career,” but believes it has only a decent job market and future growth potential. Should we be concerned?

Not necessarily. The Bureau of Labor Statistics compiled data published in a 2015 occupational outlook handbook to determine the outlook of a variety of jobs. News was good for dentistry. They determined that during 2014-2024, dentistry is projected to grow at a rate of 18 percent, which is “much faster than the average for all occupations.” The BLS also projects that the demand for dentists will continue to grow due to an aging population, greater interest in cosmetic dentistry and increased access to health insurance.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration agrees that demand is high and that we need even more dentists. HHS focuses on determining whether there are health professional shortages. In a 2015 report, HHS said we need 15,000 more dentists than we had at the time. The need continues mainly in rural areas where dental providers are less likely to open practices. Over the next eight years, HHS projects an increase in demand of 10 percent, which it doesn’t believe will be met by new graduates. They project that by 2025, all 50 states will have a shortage of dentists.

The American Dental Association Health Policy Institute, on the other hand, disagrees with the BLS and HHS. The HPI says there are already dentists “who are not busy enough and can see more patients.” They project a net increase in supply of dentists by 2033—a jump from 61.7 dentists per 100,000 people in 2013 to 63.3 per 100,000 in 2033. HPI’s stance is that this increase in supply will outpace the demand—even more dentists with less work.

There is no single answer to whether we are headed toward an oversaturated market. All projections are based on assumptions: whether the number of dental student graduates will change or remain the same; whether dentists will retire at the same age as historical trends or not; and whether demand for dental care will remain at current levels or change. The list goes on. It’s a speculative exercise.

The best thing you can do for yourself when confronted with this topic is to be vigilant and check the data. Don’t just accept whatever you hear as truth. The same applies with news: multiple perspectives, fact-checking and research are your friends. Perhaps dentistry won’t continue to grow like it once did. It depends on whose assumptions you choose to believe. Questions you can be sure of, however, include: do you like to work with your hands? Do you like being your own boss? Do you want the chance to deliver health to your community? Are you creative? Do you want a good work-life balance? If you answered yes to most of these, then breathe easy—you are in the right field.

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RYANE STAPLES
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