

Why I keep fortune cookies on my desk

Paul O'Leary, MD

Dr. O'Leary is an Adjunct Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, University of South Alabama, Mobile, Alabama, and an Adjunct Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, University of Alabama School of Medicine, Birmingham, Alabama.

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Many of my patients ask, "Why do you have fortune cookies on your desk?" Then, I offer them one. I considered having other treats, but decided on fortune cookies because of:

Comfort. The cookie is a small treat for those who want one.

Diet. You don't have to eat the cookie to enjoy it; you can still read the fortune. For patients who have an eating disorder, the cookie allows us to naturally transition the conversation to issues they are experiencing.

Cultural competency. I treat patients of many backgrounds. Some have never seen a fortune cookie (remember to warn them there is a fortune inside!). Others know the fortune cookie is not a Chinese invention,¹ as it is popularly thought to be.

Impulsivity. Do patients grab a cookie immediately, wait for one to be offered, or ask for one?

At this point, I ask patients to tell me their fortune. This allows me to assess:

Fine motor skills. Do they have a hand tremor or weakness, or a problem with involuntary movement? How well do they open the individually wrapped cookie?

Problem solving. On the slip of paper in the cookie, fortunes are printed on one side; on the other side are lucky numbers and a Chinese phrase. Some patients fail to turn the slip of paper over; they look it and say,

"There are only numbers on this piece of paper."

Eyesight. Can they see without glasses? Did they bring their glasses? (By extension, I can gauge whether they need, and use, glasses when reaching for a pill bottle in the medicine cabinet.)

Literacy. Can they read their fortune aloud?

Last, I ask what the fortune means and how it might apply to them. This helps me understand their:

Thought process. I am looking for how they think: Abstractly? Concretely? How well do they articulate and explain the meaning of the fortune?

Insight. Having them explain how the fortune applies to them can be helpful to understanding their thinking.

Reference

1. Lee J8. Solving a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside a cookie. The New York Times. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/16/dining/16fort.html?_r=2&pagewanted=1. Published January 16, 2008. Accessed April 22, 2016.



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