Why I keep fortune cookies on my desk

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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