Dealing with stress in the 21st century - a perspective for the dental profession

Ros Edlin looks at the issue of stress in the lives and careers of busy dental professionals and how you can help to minimise stress in your day

They asked the average man in the street for his opinion as to whether or not dentists experience stress, and your query will, in all probability, be met with a look of incredulity and a snort of derision. After all, isn’t stress in the domain of the poor patient rather than the high-earning, fast-living, Porsche-driving dentist?!

A media-fuelled opinion such as this may be true for a minority of dentists, but for the majority this is an entirely inaccurate assessment of dentistry today.

What is true, however, is that dentistry has been identified as one of the most stressful of the health professions.

A recent study by HL Myers and LB Myers conducted using an anonymous cross-section of 2,441 UK GDPs, found that 60 per cent of GDPs reported being nervous, tense or depressed, 58.3 per cent reported headaches, 60 per cent reported difficulty sleeping and 48.2 per cent reported feeling tired for no apparent reason - all signs possibly related to work related stress.

So why are dentists so susceptible to stress? Not only are they required to work in an intricate manner in a sensitive and intimate part of the body, sitting in the same position for long periods of time, but they also have to be responsible for the smooth running of the practice with regard to both staff and patients, as well as managing the financial aspect. Added to this are the ever-increasing demands and expectations of patients and the constant awareness of running behind schedule. As if this wasn’t enough, they have to ensure that they maintain clinical excellence in the eyes of a Regulatory Body.

Faced with all these factors, and for the most part, not having received any particular training in, for example, people skills or financial management, it is little wonder that many dentists fall victim to stress - related illnesses, either mental, physical or both.

Stress itself is not an illness but is, according to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) definition, “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them”. The HSE also “makes an important distinction between the beneficial effects of reasonable pressure and challenge (which can be stimulating, motivating and can give a ‘buzz’) and work-related stress, which is the natural but distressing reaction to demands or pressures that the person perceives they cannot cope with at a given time”. The concept of perception is particularly relevant in that, faced with the same situation, a difficult procedure or a demanding patient, one dentist may relish the challenge and yet the other be trembling in their shoes!

Also pertaining to the definition of stress are the notions of control and change.

It is clear that we function best when we are in control of our circumstances; when we feel we are responsible for our success or failures due to our own personal attributes. This could also include the responsibility of the welfare of both patients and staff. As is often the case however, the bureaucracy of the NHS mitigates against this feeling of control which could result in work-related stress.

The recent NHS Dental Contract is a prime example where it can be argued that dentists have a loss of control of their own destinies. It also illustrates the importance of involvement in the process of change for the best results to be achieved. Today’s dental environment is not going to change to accommodate the individual. It’s the individual who needs to learn to accommodate to the environment if he or she does not want to pay the price of chronic stress.

There is no doubt that we all need pressures and challenges in our lives to get us up in the morning and to keep us going. These can galvanise us into achieving great things; to work at our most productive level, but we have to be aware that having unrealistic goals or expectations can possibly result in the ‘law of diminishing returns’ ie the more we push ourselves to reach that elusive goal, the less well we can sometimes perform. This is not to underestimate the thrill of achievement, but it is worth paying heed to the warning signs.

These warning signs are like traffic lights in our lives. Green means that everything (or nearly everything) is going well with us. We are enjoying our work; the practice is thriving; we have a great team and the patients are appreciative. Home and social life is good; the children are behaving themselves and the sun is shining. Then perhaps things start to go slightly awry - your valued nurse leaves, creating extra work for the rest of the staff, and leaving you feeling is if you’ve lost your right arm. You find yourself staying later at the surgery to catch up and you are aware that you are feeling more tired than usual. At the surgery you feel your concentration slipping slightly and you are becoming tense and irritable.

This situation may carry on for a while with perhaps other events occurring to add to the mix – a complaint or family illness for example. At home, your evening glass of wine is turning into two or three. You are sleeping badly, relationships are suffering and you are starting to feel that you can’t cope. The red light is beckoning! If the symptoms continue to intensify to the extent of absolute exhaustion, ill health and the inability to cope, it could be advisable to seek help.

Personality can also have a bearing on the dentist’s ability to cope with stressful situations. A study carried out by Professor Gary Cooper et al suggested that dentists had a tendency to exhibit ‘Type A’ behaviour. People with ‘Type A’ personality tend to be driven, highly ambitious, impatient, aggressive and intolerant. They have high expectations of themselves and those around them. ‘Type B’ personalities although they may be equal- ly ambitious and successful, are able to perform in a calmer and more relaxed manner. People can fluctuate between these two behaviours which are said to be on a continuum.

A successful practice is one where effective stress management strategies are firmly in place. This contributes to the atmosphere of well-being and competence within the practice. Its positive effect emanates throughout – the staff feel valued and motivated and the patients feel more relaxed and welcome. A ‘win-win’ situation for all concerned.

Achieving this ideal situation does not come naturally to many practitioners who may require guidance. It may be necessary to consider what your goals and aspirations are in relation to both yourself and your practice. Hopefully some of the coping strategies that follow will be of assistance.
In terms of individual stress, try take a step back and assess where the stress is coming from. Writing a list of causes from the most stressful down to the least will help you gain some perspective on the problem and may inspire you to tackle some of the issues raised. It is even possible that you could be the cause of issues raised. It is even possible to be a competent receptionist who would not fill your appointment book so full that you do not have time to breathe, let alone try some deep breathing (which is excellent for calming you down). Take a deep breath (don’t hold it) and count one, two, three as you exhale slowly.

For the individual, relaxation techniques are also recommend- ed. Although it is often thought that relaxation is not compatible with working in a dental surgery, with organisation and planning it is feasible. (Some European countries manage successfully to incorporate this into their working day.) A prerequisite would have to be a competent receptionist who would not fill your appointment book so full that you do not have time to breathe, let alone try some deep breathing (which is excellent for calming you down). Take a deep breath (don’t hold it) and count one, two, three as you exhale slowly.

In your every day life having a period of relaxation is vital. It could be as basic as taking breaks in the day or going out at lunchtime to listening to music or having a relaxing bath. The importance of relaxation is that it enables you to switch off and recharge your batteries!

Equally important is physical exercise. Exercise burns up the excess adrenaline resulting from stress, allowing the body to return to a steady state. It can also increase energy and efficiency. Do find an exercise which you enjoy that will motivate you to continue doing it.

Balance your diet. Eat breakfast, drink sensibly and include lots of water to rehydrate the system. Include complex carbohydrates (wholemeal bread, jacket potato) in your diet, to counteract mood swings, and fruit and vegetables to provide vitamin C to support the immune system.

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Manage your time (and yourself) efficiently. Again, taking a step back and reviewing your working practice is essential. Do you have an allotted time for dealing with emergencies and administration? Are you constantly running behind schedule causing your stress levels to escalate? Developing leadership and organisational skills will enable you to feel more in control of your working environment.

Ensure that your staff are properly trained and aware of their individual roles and responsibilities. Encourage a culture of mutual support, whereby asking for help is not viewed as weakness. Talking over your problems with someone you trust can be such a help!

As mentioned previously, some dentists may be excellent practitioners but sadly lacking in interpersonal skills. An ability to listen is a gift. If you feel you need some training in communication, there are plenty of courses available.

By incorporating at least some of these strategies into your everyday life and your working life, you could create an environment which is stress-free and an environment in which it is a pleasure to work. It could make the difference between a good practice and an outstanding one. Who wouldn’t want that?

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About the author

Ros Edlin is a freelance stress consultant. Her background is in social work and counselling. She lives in the North West and travels throughout the UK giving presentations and facilitating workshops on stress awareness and management in the dental team.

Ros tries to practice what she preaches and relaxes by walking the dog, yoga and playing the piano (badly!).

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