Coping with stress in your practice

Joanna Taylor MHS suggests 12 steps towards achieving balance

The recently published Annual NHS Staff Survey revealed that almost one in four (25 per cent) of NHS dentists have suffered from work related stress in the last year. My own survey last year, to investigate the causes of stress in the dental team, revealed that over a third (36 per cent) of the dentists who took part were stressed about their work during most working days and nearly a fifth (19 per cent) felt stressed every day.

Stress, then, continues to be high on the agenda for dentists – and therefore for the whole dental team, for what affects one member will certainly have an impact on everyone else; stress can be very contagious. It also causes physical symptoms, which lead to increased absence due to sickness, putting more pressure on the rest of the team. This can lead to increased irritability and conflicts between staff members, reduced efficiency and in the end, of course, the care which your patients receive will inevitably suffer.

Do you know what causes stress for the members of your team? Have you ever asked? What if the cause of some of their stress at work is something you can do something about? The respondents to my survey cited running late and conflicts between staff members as being the main causes of stress in the practice, and these are certainly things which can be addressed within the practice.

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Addressing directly the actual causes of stress is one way to help; another is to change the way you deal with things by raising your own stress threshold, so things which used to bother you no longer have the same effect. The following are some suggestions for simple ways to make small changes in your life and work, which can result in big changes in the future:

1 Take responsibility and take action for the things you can change. Make a list of all the things that are causing you stress at work. Divide them into two columns: things you can control or take responsibility to change, and things over which you genuinely have no control at the present time. For the things you can do something about, put them in order of importance and make a plan for dealing with them; what resources do you need, whom can you ask to help, what will the results be... then take action. Certain the one thing you can choose to control is your own state – if you are not in control of it, then who is?

2 Accept the things that are not within your power to change at the present time. For those things which are present or outside your control – is it possible for you to just accept that at the moment you cannot change them? Or perhaps, can you change the way you think about them? (In NLP this is called a “reframe”.)
5 Be grateful and appreciate the good things in your life. Are you grateful for your patients and your colleagues, or are they a nuisance? Gratitude is an enormous power antidote to stress; sit down for a few minutes and feel grateful for the objects that are around you, and the people who designed and created them.

4 Use relaxation and positive stress reduction techniques (such as self-hypnosis) daily. Just 10-15 minutes of self-hypnosis or meditation fitted into your daily schedule can make an enormous difference to your state of mind; raising your stress threshold and bringing both physical and psychological benefits.

5 Agree, therefore avoiding arguments (ie be kind, not right!) We all have our own way of perceiving the world around us and we all have our own opinions, values and beliefs. When we respect others’ right to have their own opinion, then we can appreciate that they are also right – according to the values and beliefs they hold and the way they see their world. If we make them wrong, then we are measuring them by our own values and beliefs. Instead of arguing that we are right, we can choose to be kind by respecting their right to their own beliefs.

6 Reduce (or avoid altogether) nicotine, alcohol and caffeine consumption. Excessive consumption of caffeine and alcohol causes stress to the body, as does smoking. Reducing our intake can help considerably to lower stress levels, as well as improving health.

7 Participate in regular physical activity. This doesn’t necessarily mean training for a marathon – just a small amount of exercise can make a big difference. Perhaps you could just park the car a little further away from the practice, get off the bus a stop earlier or go for a short walk at lunchtime.

8 Ensure you get sufficient breaks, rest and sleep. Our bodies need time to rest and regenerate. Lack of good quality sleep itself causes stress and anxiety. You are not helping anybody by tiring yourself out.

9 Prioritise tasks. Having a huge number of things to do can be very overwhelming. Make a ‘To Do’ list, then prioritise tasks in order of importance and urgency – then do them in order of importance and urgency. This may sound obvious, but even the act of writing the list can be a big help.

10 Ask for help when you need it. If you are struggling with something, never be too proud to ask for help. People like to be needed; you don’t need to make yourself into a martyr trying to achieve something which would be much easier with a little help from a colleague, coach or friend.

11 Set boundaries and learn to say ‘NO’. Lots of us are ‘people pleasers’ and have difficulty saying ‘no’ to things (as I said in point 10, we like to be needed!). However, it’s important to set yourself some personal boundaries; you need to have a work-life balance and that means that you should remember that your life is important! If you are on holiday, you should make sure you are away from the practice; not “just popping in to see how they are managing” or spending half the morning dealing with e-mails. Remember point 8!

12 Take time for yourself to have fun and do things you enjoy: smile, laugh and see the funny side! Finally, laughter really is the best medicine. Life is not a rehearsal – it’s for living and enjoying!!

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