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

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As 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 shrug 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 dentists have 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, 55.5 per cent were constantly aware of running out of time, and 63 per cent were aware that they are feeling more tense than usual. At the surgery you feel your concentration slipping slightly and you are becoming tense and irritable.

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’.i.e. 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 flourishing; we have a great team and the patients are appreciative. Home and social life is good; the children are doing well. Yellow, though they may be equally admirable, work-related stress, which is high expectations of performance coupled with low expectations of rewards, can result in work-related stress. The recent NHS Dental Contract for the UK is a prime example where individuals who need to learn to accommodate to the job of working in the dental environment are not going to be able to do just that. The ‘Type A’ personalities 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 equally 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. Positive effect emanates throughout—the staff feel valued and motivated and the patients feel more relaxed and welcomed. A win/win situation for all concerned. Achieving this ideal situation is not something that comes naturally to many practitioners who may require guidance. It may be nec-

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“It is clear that we function best when we are in control of our circumstances”

It is 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 the stress! You may need help in dealing with some of these issues. Try not to let pride stand in the way of getting the help you need. It could also be useful to employ this technique with your staff by asking them to identify the sources of stress. ‘By airing and discussing grievances, concerns and new strategies, the various members will feel part of the dental team and provide mutual support in time of stress.’

For the individual, relaxation techniques are also recommended. 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 in 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 potatoes) in your diet, to counteract mood swings, and fruit and vegetables to provide vitamin C to support the immune system.

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 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?

Editorial note: A complete list of references is available from the publisher.

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