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 are one of the most stressful of the professions. A recent study by HJ Myers and LB Myers conducted using an anonymous cross-section of 2,411 UK GDPs, found that 60 per cent of GDPs reported being nervous, tense or depressed, 55.5 per cent were ‘full of doubt’, 60 per cent reported difficulty sleeping and 42.2 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 environment where they are responsible for successful outcomes, but they are also required 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 regulatory bodies.

With all these factors, 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, according to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) definition, the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demands placed upon them. The HSE also makes an important distinction between the beneficial and adverse 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 pertinent 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 successes 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, bureaucracy mitigates against this feeling of control which could result in work-related stress. The recent NHS Dental Contract for the UK 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 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’. i.e. the more we push ourselves to reach that elusive goal, the less well we can sometimes perform. This is not to undermine the drive to achieve, but it is worth paying heed to the warning signs. These warning signs are like traffic lights in our lives. Green means that 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 behaving themselves and the sun is shining. Then perhaps things start to go slightly awry—your evening glass of wine is turning into a three—two. 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 Cary Cooper et al suggested that dentists had a tendency to exhibit ‘Type A’ behaviour, people with ‘Type A’ personalities tend to be driven, highly ambitious, impa- tient, 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. A 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 is not only naturally to many practitioners who may require guidance. It may be nec-
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Essary 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.

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