

Time management among dental students – Something to consider?

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Would I be exaggerating if I were to say that no other university experience compares to the life of an average dental student?

As cliché as it may sound, it would be difficult to match the exponential professional growth seen by typical dental students in such a short period of time.

In addition to providing patient centred care, we inherently need to take responsibility for our development, seeking inspiration from within. From day one we are constantly encouraged to seek new knowledge, remain up to date and challenge ourselves to learn new skills.

There is also an emphasis to differentiate ourselves as undergraduates due to the competitive environment in the profession. Like any other student, we have desires to partake in extra-curricular activities and are subject to a variety of personal circumstances. With this potentially hectic lifestyle, a poorly organised student may face extreme pressure and burnout. This begs the question – must we need to look more critically at our time management?

Firstly, there is significant variation among students and their ability to manage time. Examples of good time management differ among individuals and tips and strategies may not be applicable to all.

The emotional intelligence (EI) of a student has been suggested to influence behaviour associated with good and bad time management.

Students with high emotional intelligence, overcome setbacks more easily, and in the process rely on good time management to assist them. In contrast, lower EI is linked with poorer organisation and less ability to manage stress actively (Pau, Croucher et al. 2004)¹.

Stress and time management appear to have a mutual effect on each other. Time management has long been cited as a leading cause for stress amongst GDP's (Wilson, Coward et al. 1998)².

Students similarly cite lack of leisure time due to high working demands as the top contributor to stress (Pöhlmann, Jonas et al. 2005)³. With more clinical exposure, we should also aim to optimise clinical time management through adequate planning ensuring that patients are being treated safely.

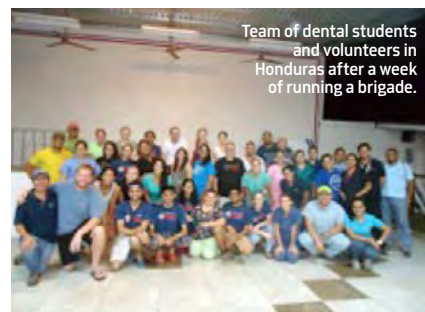
Having an idea of how the day will pan out, setting goals for treatment with patients and appropriate handling of correspondence help make a schedule smooth, lifting morale. Final year students are also perhaps more likely to distinguish the performance of their peers regarding, efficiency and time management, when compared to their BDS2 counterparts (Tricio, Woolford et al. 2015)⁴. Most of the literature evaluating time management intervention in students shows positive changes in academic results.

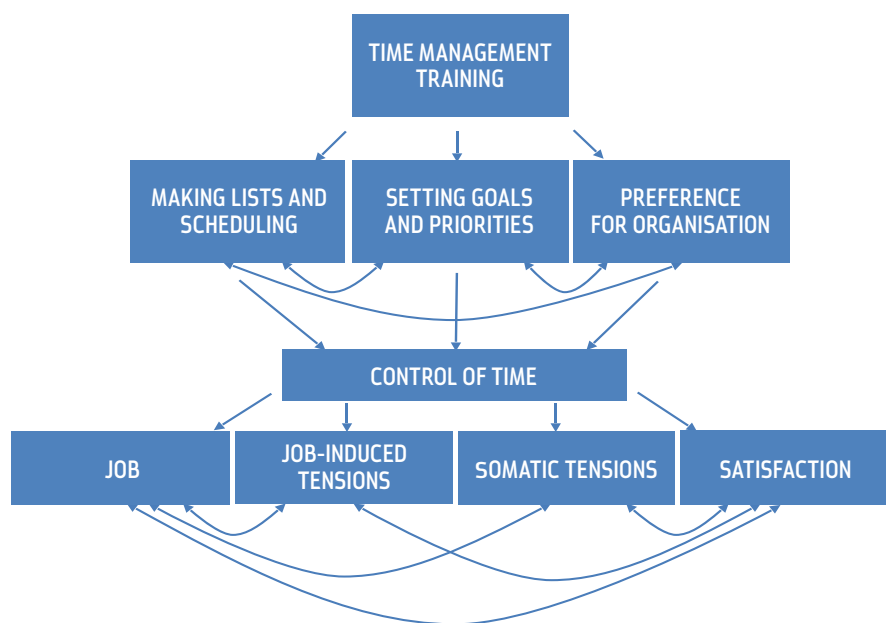
One study, however focusing on dental students showed no association between strategies and performance (Mace, Tira 1999)⁵. Macan 1994⁶ suggested that perceived control of time could lower stress in employees, leading to better individual performances.

This effect was owed to simple time management strategies, aimed at setting goals and prioritising important tasks. It is widely accepted, that the use of such strategies at the very least improves health and reduce stress (Häfner, Stock et al. 2015)⁷.

Looking at time management models, I am particularly intrigued by the Pareto model. It states that 80% of the results achieved should come from 20% of the input. This highlights the need for efficient, result-based work. This works when investing the most time into critical stages of a task.

The 20% could refer to the fine detail of this aspect leaving the other 80% less critical while appearing to be more important as it is 'larger' (Craft, Leake 2002)⁸. Another famous concept is that of the pickle jar model. It describes a jar mainly holding rocks (important tasks), pebbles (desirable





activities), sand (small, compulsory tasks) and water (filling the space like clutter around us).

By focusing primarily on the 'rocks' during an individual's most productive hours, there is perceived more time for pebbles (leisure). 'Sand' may take the form of emails and should be done at less productive times unless they are urgent (Wright 2002)⁹.

After almost 4 years, it's remarkable to see how far we've progressed, seamlessly edging closer to the molded professionals we aim to be. I've thoroughly enjoyed my clinical and academic hours and have tried to maintain hobbies such as long distance running, football and playing the piano.

I enjoy giving back to schools in the local community and have acted as a team leader for a cohort of students mentoring primary school children. I was also a committee member for my universities' bhangra society, offering free weekly classes, spreading a vibrant cultural dance form.

A significant highlight has been my trip to Honduras with Global Brigades, where we set up a medical and dental brigade in a village. For a week we gave children oral hygiene advice, visited other local communities and shadowed dentists providing much needed extractions and restorative work for the people in the community.

These activities and more can be difficult to manage and I haven't been immune to stress. Periods of time where I have been less organised, have resulted in less sleep,

more fatigue and an element of guilt. I perhaps spent excessive time on tasks that I enjoyed more, neglecting new challenges and the patience needed to develop skills within them. This is relevant academically as confidence is built on efficiently tackling familiar tasks and concepts rather than being stagnant. Essay writing, answering tutorials, making notes on lectures all require different mind-sets and skills and shifting between these prepare us for the challenges in the real world.

It is easy to fall behind during the most critical Autumn term and this can lead to a tough second half of the year. I've participated in the KCL Diwali show for the past 3 years, once appearing in two acts. Rehearsals can be taxing and even the most organised schedule can be hard to follow. Improvements regarding time management I made this year began with outlining my aims for the term enabled me to prioritise my days and schedule appropriately.

I set out mini-goals for busier days in order to keep on top of work. Revision sessions with friends, helped immensely and I discovered that revising on the tube could make a long commute quite productive. After clinical sessions, I aimed to complete my work immediately after, heading to rehearsals content with the work I had done, turning a potentially tiring activity to an enjoyable one.

I felt I was getting the bulk of my work done, spending less time evaluating my

progress and delaying reflection.

This would not have been possible without minimising distractions by being clear about my availability with friends and family. Reflecting back, I miss balancing rehearsals and university hours as I feel it strengthened by work ethic in dentistry. This proved to me that if done properly, additional positive activity can enhance main priorities rather than be detrimental.

Based on my personal experiences, effective time management is the best way to minimise stress as a dental student. It is worth finding a system that works for you, affording time to valuable extra-circular activities, making you a more 'well-rounded' person. The effects of time management on academic performance is hard to analyse but can have a significant effect on the quality of your professional lives beyond dental school, highlighting its importance. ■



Shri Academy of Dance dancers at a flashmob in Covent Garden. Amongst the crew at dental students Sahil Sharma, Ameena Khurshid, Hemel Mandalia, Sherin Rashad, Yihan Miao and Kishan Sheth

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