

Overcoming Stress in Dentistry

with

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Intro:

My wish to study dentistry stemmed from experiences shadowing my own general dentist as well as dental specialists of varying fields, and this passion has only grown during the past 3½ years of dental school.

Dentistry is an ever-advancing niche of healthcare which offers the unique combination of incorporating manual and artistic skills into a daily regime; the formation of close and long-term relationships with patients; and the ability to contribute positively to the community.

However, the degree does not come without its due stress, and at times is so trying that causes one to question whether it's worth continuing the subject. It is this aspect which I wish to focus on—looking at some of the evidence behind dental stress and how to cope with it, and an insight into my personal efforts to cope with the rigours of the course.

Stress in dentistry

Dr Michael Kesner, CEO of Quantum Leap Success in Dentistry, has said that dentistry has one of the highest burnout rates of all professions. He outlines some reasons for this, including the vast knowledge of medicine, materials, sciences and artistry required; the financial stresses of running a practice; the emotional stresses when dealing with difficult patients; and stresses relating to medicolegal matters.

However, what is also mentioned is the stress felt during dental school, where it can be argued that such long-term stresses may initiate (Rada & Johnson-Leong, 2004).

I feel that it is during this crucial time that one should capitalise on the university environment and what it can offer, enabling one to identify what helps relieve stress, before being thrust into the world of clinical practice and losing access to the same extracurricular opportunities. Indeed, Gale (1998)

highlighted the importance of becoming aware of the physical and emotional behaviours which one exhibits during stress, to overcoming it.

A study undertaken by Dr Wael Al-Omari (2005) examining the perceived stress among dental students, dental hygiene students and dental technology students found that some of the highest scores given by all students included those for 'inadequate time for relaxation' and 'examinations'; the two of which are explicitly linked where time required for studying for said examinations leaves little to relax; this was certainly the case for me.

As can be seen in Fig. 1, personal factors (defined by Al-Omari as including making friends, lack of time for relaxation, reduced holidays, etc.) show a significant contribution to one's stress particularly in the third and fourth years.

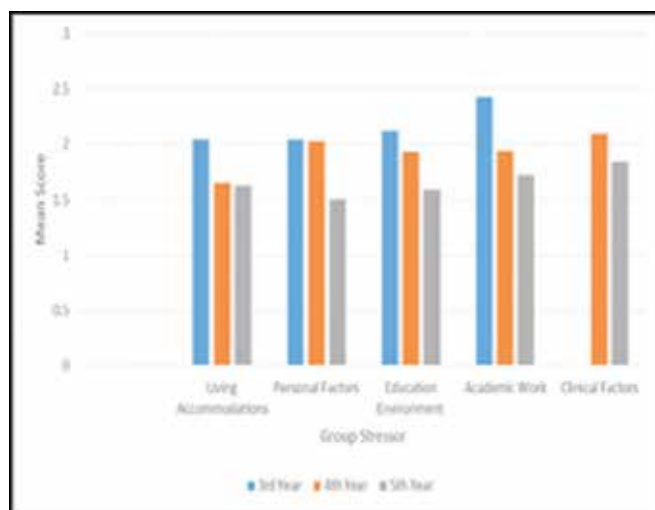


Fig. 1 Mean scores of potential stressor groups for dental students (adapted from Al-Omari (2005))

However, a further trend can be seen where academic work and clinical factors become the major stressors in play for fifth-year students. This is something one can expect when considering the increased stresses associated with finals assessments and applying for Dental Foundation year placements.

Moreover, qualitative studies by Dahan and Bedos (2010) have considered the typology of dental students based on their experiences of stress. Upon analysis of the data

Table 1 Typology of dental students according to their experience of stress (adapted from Dahan & Bedos, 2010)

	HIGHLY STRESSED STUDENTS	MODERATELY STRESSED STUDENTS	RELAXED STUDENTS
SOURCES OF STRESS (STRESSORS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fear of failure ➤ Heavy workload ➤ Transition periods ➤ Difficult relations with academic staff (only for struggling students) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Workload ➤ Transition Periods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Workload
HOW THEY COPE WITH STRESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Maladaptive coping skills: worrying, avoiding, wishful thinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Maladaptive coping skills: worrying, avoiding, wishful thinking ➤ Adaptive coping skills: extracurricular activities, support, control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Adaptive coping skills: extracurricular activities, support, control

found (partially summarised in Table 1, p. 99), it is rather interesting to note how those engaging in adaptive coping methods such as extracurricular activities are of the less-stressed cohort than those using maladaptive mechanisms such as worrying and avoidance.

Of further pertinence is the fact that the major stressor concerning the more-relaxed students was that of the workload, as opposed to more personal factors, as was the case with highly stressed students.

Though the link may be somewhat tenuous, it is possible to relate Al-Omari's work with that of Dahan and Bedos: As students progress from earlier to more-senior years of dental school, their main stressor is that of the intense academic and clinical workload, and that indeed a more effective way to cope with this may be to adopt said adaptive coping mechanisms.

So where do I fit into all this? I'd like to take this opportunity to exhibit one of my adaptive coping mechanisms, which has aided me in overcoming stresses both in and outside of dental school.

Whilst returning home one night after watching *Iron Man 2*, I felt inspired and thought: "Wouldn't it be cool to have my own Iron Man costume?" Thus began research into how to go about doing this, whereupon I stumbled upon Pepakura, a form of modelling craftwork in which 2-D card templates are used to construct 3-D models through a combination of cutting, folding and gluing the prelabelled components.

One can digitally create one's own templates, or modify premade ones in size and complexity to suit a crafter's individual needs. Pepakura can be used to create many things, but is most commonly used to build wearable suits of armour, weapons and comic book artifacts, and this is what I chose to do.

I initially decided to build the Iron Man helmet, and as I researched more into the subject I discovered the potential to develop the initial card construction into a far more realistic piece of craftwork using fibreglass, cements and spray paint.

It in fact took me a year to complete the helmet, working in the spare hours between my AS studies, and a further year before I tackled the entire suit.

Fig 2. Summary of Projects to date



Since this, I have spent time over the past few years alongside my dental studies, experimenting with this creative process, using different materials, methods and sequences of manufacture (Table 2); taking on a variety of creative challenges (Fig. 2); and even participating at events such as ComiCon (Fig. 3). Pepakura is an activity which I thoroughly enjoy, and hope to continue learning from and developing my skill in, in the years to come.

Conclusion

Dentistry is both a stressful degree and profession. Evidence shows how engaging in an extracurricular activity as a means of relaxation is a crucial form of self-awareness

that is beneficial for long-term stress reduction. I personally have felt the benefits of having a hobby which I am passionate about.

It has enabled me to improve my manual dexterity and creative skills, which are essential within a dental setting, and helped to provide a vital escape from the relentless stresses of academia and clinical expectations.

Having a hobby, of whatever form, be it a sport, playing an instrument or reading books, is extremely important, in my opinion, not only to reduce stress in a working environment, but also to develop one's depth of character which academics cannot offer, thus creating a well-rounded individual: an admirable trait for a dentist to acquire certainly, but also to carry throughout life. ■



Table 2 Summary of Projects to date

Project	Base Materials	Manufacture Method
Iron Man Helmet (a)	Paper Car Body Filler (Cement)	Paper model fibre-glassed outside and inside Car body filler placed all over externally Hand sanded Primed Painted with gold and red metal spray paints Foam placed internally to customise helmet to my head size Sunglass lenses placed to cover eye spaces
Iron Man Suit (a)	Foam	Foam build sealed with PVA Primed Painted with gold and red metallic spray paints Buckles and Velcro attachments placed to clip all parts together LED lights placed with manual switch for chest lighting
Batman Cowl (based on 'The Dark Knight' movie) (b)	Foam Car Body Filler (Cement)	Foam build sealed with PVA Fibre-glassed with resin externally Car body filler placed all over externally Hand sanded Primed Painted with black matte spray paint
Deadpool Mask (c)	Paper Red Satin Black Leather White cloth	Paper model fibre-glassed externally Two layers red satin used to cover paper model and create smoother shape to mask Zip placed posteriorly to mask to enable easier placement/removal Black leather placed in areas surrounding eyes Thin, stretched white cloth used to cover eye spaces whilst enabling vision from inside mask
Power Rangers Helmet (d)	Foam Car Body Filler (Cement) Acrylic	Foam build sealed with PVA glue Car body filler applied externally Sanded Primed Painted with red metallic spray paint and paint marker pens (Gold, Silver and Black) Visor made from plastic bottle acrylic Buckles and metal hinge placed onto posterior segment of helmet to facilitate easier placement/removal Bicycle helmet head brace placed internally to enable adjustment of helmet once worn to fit range of head sizes (unlike Iron Man Helmet)
Master Chief Helmet (from 'Halo' gaming franchise) – to be completed (e)	Foam (...so far)	Foam build completed Rest of construction to follow

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