

How Can Dentists and Dental Students Minimise the Level of Stress They Experience?

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Even as a fifth-year dental student who's just entering the profession, I've realised that dentistry is one of the most stressful professions by the clinical work I've undertaken. I may not be an expert in the field of stress management, but I believe that I've developed some traits to help me control and manage the level of stress that I experience.

Stress management is vital to becoming a great professional, but like many aspects of dentistry it's a component which no textbook or lecture can teach. It must be learned through experience.

Some of stress-causing factors in dental practice are:

- Feeling inadequate for the tasks you're carrying out.
- Boredom, when dentistry involves lots of repetitive movements.
- Too much work to get done in very little time.

- Long work hours, leading to poor personal relationships, nutritional habits and exercise habits.
- Extreme attention to detail and the continuous reaching for perfection.
- Treating patients who are extremely anxious can increase the professional's level of stress.
- Lack of patient satisfaction for the work you're providing.
- Loneliness as a result of working in a confined and isolated environment much of the time.
- Poor professional relationships between team members.
- Financial pressures from running a business.
- Eyestrain, back and neck problems.

However, thinking that stress is a bad thing must not carry us away. Small stress levels are great efficiency boosters, which

increase performance. However, surplus amounts can have dangerous effects on health.

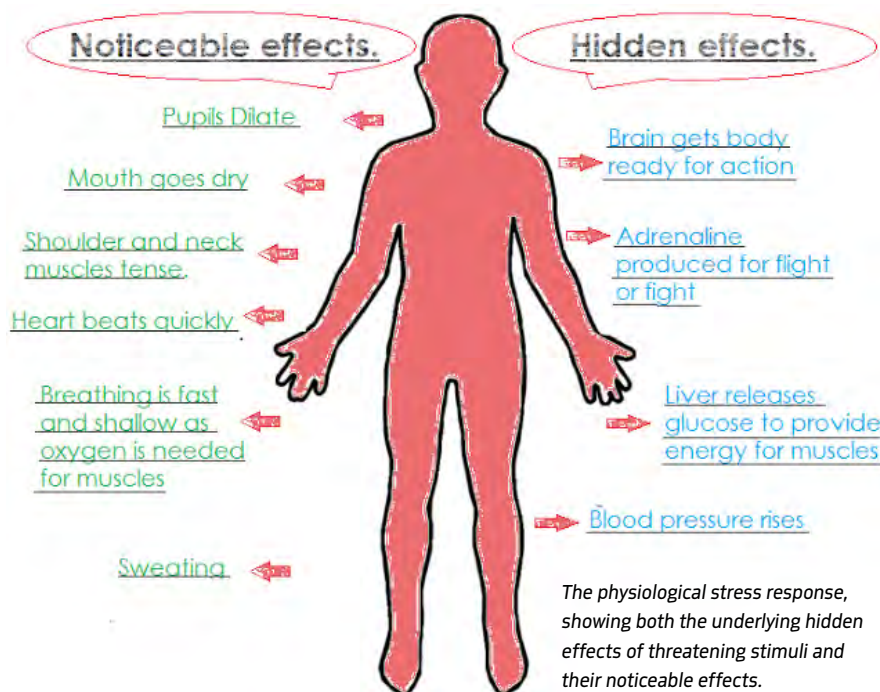
Stress is a complicated concept, which facilitates physiological and emotional responses to the environment when a threatening stimulus occurs. The physiological response is known as fight-or-flight, which involves the body priming for action by increasing the release of adrenaline into the bloodstream and vasodilating vessels running to skeletal muscle. This then has a knock-on effect on our rational thoughts, which makes it seem as if everything or everybody is a threat out to get us, increasing our chances of survival.

For example, if a threatening stimulus such as a tiger is running towards you, your body would get primed to either run from or fight the tiger. In a modern dental setting it's unlikely that you'll ever have a tiger running around your clinic, but seemingly harmless stimuli will occur, which will activate the fight-or-flight response.

What happens to you when you are stressed as a dental professional?

- Increased neck, back, and headaches.
- Increased perspiration, which can be uncomfortable for yourself and those around you.
- Quick mood swings, which can cause poor relationships with colleagues.
- A drop in concentration span.
- Less precision with your work, leading to a decrease in quality.
- This may ultimately result in bad sleeping patterns, increased alcohol drinking and poor dietary patterns.

So, how can we reduce our stress levels?



more financial gain if performed well, or more likely to poor-quality procedures and feelings of professional inadequacy. (Also, these procedures will need to be corrected at a later date and the patient will be unimpressed. Keeping realistic targets and planning well in advance is clearly the way forward.)

The third point I wish to talk about is about your working environment. Many practitioners have poor management systems, which lead to them having patients waiting for long amounts of time. Invest in a good system and you will reap the rewards immediately.

Your schedule will be better planned, appointments will be more effectively allocated and patient recalls will be automatic, leaving you able to focus on what you are best at—clinical dentistry.

Also optimise lighting, equipment and heating for your own personal preference. Wear comfortable clinical wear when doing dentistry. Your feeling confident will translate into better quality of work.

I hope that implementing the above methods in your day-to-day routine enables you to feel more confident with your work and excel in your clinical endeavors. Remember that a less-stressed dentist is a more successful practitioner! ■

Resources:

1. How does the body respond to stress, <http://psychorevision.blogspot.co.uk/2013/01/how-does-body-respond-to-stress.html> (Fig. 1)
2. Wikiwand: the Yerkes-Dodson Law, http://www.wikiwand.com/en/Yerkes-Dodson_Law (Fig. 2)

It's important to understand that each of us is different; factors which increase my stress levels may or may not increase yours by the same amount. But any potentially harmful or threatening stimulus in the dental setting is likely to increase stress levels to some degree.

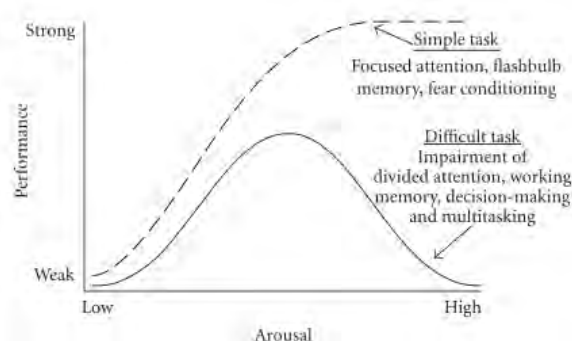
On a personal level, we need to prioritise our stress-relieving activities and hobbies. I ensure that in my personal schedule I always have slots where I can go to the gym and my dance classes. If you don't currently have a hobby, find something you're passionate about and balance these activities with your work life. You should also give yourself a break by taking holidays when the pressures of dentistry start to fill-in; these will re-energise you and allow you to be more enthusiastic when you return to work. Ensure you put aside time to spend with family and friends and maintain these personal, intimate relationships. Talking with loved ones or close friends and colleagues can help minimise anxiousness and stress.

In the professional setting, ensure you're sitting comfortably with correct posture. Many dentists suffer from back, neck and eye problems because of poor posture. Place your feet flat on the floor with your legs apart, sit right back into the chair, keep your back straight, ensure forearms are parallel to the floor, and make sure the patient's head is at your abdominal region. If checking the

maxillary teeth, tilt the patient's head up, and for mandibular teeth tilt the patient's head down. Understanding good posture may seem like a basic task, but is absolutely imperative because it maintains good health and professional fulfillment, and improves your efficiency and quality of work. In the real world, correct positioning is very often overlooked. Get into good habits straightaway!

Also, try your best to avoid conflicts and arguments by quickly coming to a resolution of any issue which may arise. Delegate effectively so each team member knows his or her role, which will in turn improve efficiency and reduce the likelihood of conflict occurring in the first place. Predetermine your workload and prevent overload in your professional life.

The last point is crucial for achieving stress reduction. Because dentistry operates like all other businesses, you will at times try to do lots of work in unrealistic time limits, which will lead to either



The Yerkes-Dodson law of anxiety, indicating that the optimal performance level is at a medium level of stress. Poor performance is caused by either too low or too high stress levels, indicating that some level of stress has positive attributes.