

The Importance of Self-Care for Dentists

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We're a bunch of big-hearted careers, skillful with our hands, highly dedicated and willing to go to extraordinary lengths to meet the needs of our patients. We're kind, gentle, considerate and thoughtful. We're scientists, high-precision technicians, artists, entertainers and counsellors, all in the space of a half-hour appointment. Many of us, on a daily basis, also manage the multitude of tasks involved in owning a business. And that's just our job. Like everyone else, we also care for families, buy groceries, pay our bills and look after our homes.

We have so much going for us. We're talented in so many areas. But the big question is - are we caring for ourselves enough?

Feelings of depression, overwhelm and anxiety are common among dentists, and we are one of the highest-risk professions for suicide. Being professionals, with certain "standards" to uphold, and very often with an inner perfectionist running the show, we do not always prioritise ourselves in ways that will be beneficial for our health and wellbeing.

Two specific challenges facing us as dentists are:

Emotional Contagion

Many of us are individuals who are sensitive to the needs of others. This is one of our greatest gifts as human beings. As dentists it allows us to "tune in" to what our patient might be feeling and needing during the appointment. We are able to steer the appointment in such a way that will help our patient feel happy and comfortable. However this sensitivity can also be a cause of great stress if not acknowledged and cared for properly.

Often a patient will attend their appointment in a state of pain and/or fear. This may also translate into anger and angry outbursts in some cases. There are not many individuals who actively enjoy attending the dentist, and for some it can be very traumatic. It is hard to maintain your own inner peace and calm while being contained in a small area with someone who is in an extreme state of fear.

The trauma we experience to our systems in such an encounter can almost be likened to the "vicarious trauma" experienced by counsellors and therapists. This term refers to the internal stress experienced by a therapist when, because of the need to uphold professional standards, they are not able to immediately and naturally discharge their own feelings and reactions to a client's traumatic stories and reactions.

Shaking, crying or moving the body are all natural ways we humans discharge stress. However in our professional setting, we are limited in our outward reactions. Most commonly we sit still in our surgery and try to remain calm, while our heart pounds and our body breaks out in a sweat! The stress remains internalised, and left unattended this can damage our health and sense of self.

Boundaries with appointment setting

Humans are social creatures, and many of us like the feeling of being part of a team. Our relationship with our receptionists, assistants and other team members is crucial to us. And of course, we want to please our patients, as well as make sure our practices are financially viable. However we may find our appointment books are squeezed so full that we have no time during our working day to even go to the bathroom or have a drink of water!

It can be hard to take a stand and say “no” when your receptionist is pleading with you to squeeze an extra patient into your book. The person may be in pain, or may be about to go on holiday and want to hurry their treatment along before they go. You may feel pressure both from your staff members and from your patient to schedule an appointment you really don’t want to. You may also be pushing yourself to earn “just a little bit extra” for your practice each day.

We are so used to working non-stop without regular breaks, however working in this way over many months and years can take its toll on our physical and emotional health.

Putting our own Needs Aside

The subconscious message we receive when we constantly put our own needs aside in the ways described above is: “You don’t matter”. To compound this, a patient or staff member’s reaction may trigger an internal voice common to so many of us, which might say “You caused this person pain. You’re a bad person”. Or “If you don’t agree to see this patient, you’re a bad person”. Or “You’re letting the team down. You’re a bad person”.

Even if the message is not recognised as such, it may also play out in the form of bodily pain, illness or general feelings of depression and/or anxiety.

You may think this sounds extreme. Our unconscious and subconscious processes, however, are extremely subtle, and often have their beginnings back in early childhood. At moments of stress in our adult lives, our unconscious material is triggered into repeating old ideas and perceptions we hold about ourselves (often untrue but usually derogatory). These are ideas and perceptions we may have picked up in our childhood from the reactions of our caregivers, teachers and from our environment. Our working lives as dentists are fertile grounds for stimulating our unconscious material in this way.

What can we do to care for ourselves as dentists?

Let’s nourish ourselves as human beings. That will involve different things for each one of us. Perhaps it means scheduling regular breaks between patients, where we make a cup of tea as a relaxing ritual, or even leave the surgery for a few minutes to breathe in some fresh air and take a walk. It may also mean creating some time in our lives for the other things we love to do, such as being in nature, singing, dancing, sport and playing games.

Meditation and self-awareness are useful tools in caring for ourselves. Once we begin to notice our internal reactions while at work (and home!), we begin to be a compassionate and curious witness to what is going on inside us. Over time, with much love, care and patience towards ourselves, stressful situations can become a lot easier to deal with.

Self-comfort can be a very helpful tool to use. There are many ways to do this, and what is comforting to each of us is different, as we are all unique. Placing a hand on your heart, or giving yourself a hug can be very soothing, and begins to build a compassionate, loving relationship with yourself. In this way, we learn to receive loving support when we most need it.

You may experiment with the creation of some art. Creating an image that represents a “safe” space for you, or a place where you feel soothed, can be a talisman of your care for yourself. Keeping a daily journal - perhaps writing during your lunch hour in a park, or before or after work in a favourite spot - can also be a beautiful way to develop your inner relationship. Your creations are just for you - it is not necessary to share them with anyone else. This is about your own inner journey, and about you providing a space to care for you.

Seeking coaching and emotional support from a coach or therapist can be invaluable in your self-care plan. Be sure to work with someone you feel comfortable with, and be sure to choose someone who has undertaken their own process of self-care.

Many dentists do not seek support through fear they will be “tarnished” professionally. It is true that there are many different diagnoses and labels available nowadays, and not all are helpful. There are many forms of support available and I encourage you to use your own discernment about what you, as an individual, need.

Beware of adopting an attitude that there is something wrong with you. We are all human beings, and anyone who pretends they have never struggled with anything in life is not being honest (perhaps not even with themselves). We ought to treat coaching and therapy like going to the gym - as a part of our ongoing wellbeing maintenance.

Perhaps it would be beneficial to adjust your working week in some way? This might involve cutting down hours, or rearranging them to suit your lifestyle better. There are often many creative solutions available once we start asking ourselves what we really need.

Lastly, know this. You are so much more than “a dentist”. You deserve happiness and fulfilment in life. You have so many gifts to offer, and dentistry is just one way in which you are choosing to express those gifts.

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