

Stress and burnout among dentists

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Dentists in South Africa are under exceedingly increasing pressure and strain during the past year. In addition to the stressors and influences traditionally associated with burnout in dentists, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown has added more complex layers within the South African context.

Whether in the private sector or in the public service, dentists all feel the increase psychological and physical pressures associated with a wide variety of stressors during this challenging time. Dentistry has inherent stressors, and these are broadly described as workplace issues, financial matters, conflict, personal health, unpleasant/toxic work environments and other factors.

Dentists have traditionally faced a variety of work-related stressors that range from financial and managerial, to practice management, workplace/work environment, societal influences and even personal circumstances. Not all of these may have a negative connotation. However, a rapid build-up of positive stressors may also prove to be incapacitating to a practitioner.¹ The impact of these stressors and associated factors is different on dissimilar individuals, but the general trend exhibited in the literature indicates a decline in the mental and physical well-being when no intervention is done.

The effects of these stressors may oftentimes manifest in a physiologic manner. The most frequently reported signs and symptoms reported in this regard include lower back pain followed by headaches and abdominal complications among others. Psychologically, dentists reportedly suffer more from anxiety and depression.

The combination of these effects that result from the increased chronic pressure oftentimes leads to professional burnout. Once overwhelmed, the dentist is rendered ineffective, and a vicious cycle ensues. Burnout is characterized by mental and physical exhaustion, by a negative or cynical attitude, and by a dissatisfaction of the self, and of the workplace. This is often accompanied by depression and some form of anxiety disorder.^{1,2}

It is therefore of the utmost importance that we as dentists find ways to ensure our mental and physical well-being during this time. Even though this phenomenon is clearly described and documented in the literature, there is little to find regarding correcting this professional burnout in dentists.

This may, unknowingly, be exploited by employers, or even misread. Seeking counselling and professional



support is the first line of intervention. Every one of us must take the time and make the effort to take care of ourselves, and also to ensure that appropriate coping mechanisms and support structures are in place.

Take the time to do self-evaluation, a virtual stock-take of your current position and situation to evaluate burnout risk, and determine from there what actions, if any, are required to protect your personal wellbeing. Identifying the source of major stressors early will facilitate a smoother management process to the individual and will allow for a more comfortable approach in dealing with it. In this way your occupational participation stands a better chance of being preserved.

References and further reading

1. Rada RE, Johnson-Leong C. Stress, burnout, anxiety and depression among dentists. *JADA*. 2004; 135: 788-94.
2. Huri M, Bagis N, Eren H, Basibüyük O, Sahin S, Umaroglu M, et al. Burnout and occupational participation among dentists with teaching responsibilities in universities. *Psychology, Health & Medicine*. 2016; DOI:10.1080/13548506.2016.1210177.