

The Unseen Pain in the Dental Surgery: Why Our Profession's Mental Health Can No Longer Be Ignored

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If you were to walk into any dental practice in South Africa, you would see the same picture: a team of professionals, masked and gloved, projecting an image of calm competence. We are problem-solvers. We are healers. We are, by the very nature of our work, expected to be pillars of strength for our patients and our teams.

But beneath the surface of this clinical composure, a silent epidemic is brewing. I'm not talking about caries or periodontal disease. I'm talking about the profound strain on our collective mental health and well-being.

Internationally, our colleagues are sounding the alarm. The British Dental Association reports stress levels among dentists that are staggeringly high. The American Dental Association has launched extensive campaigns on dentist well-being, openly discussing burnout, depression, and the troubling prevalence of substance abuse as a coping mechanism. They have recognised that the very environment of our work – long hours in a confined space, performing precision tasks on anxious patients, under immense time pressure – is a perfect catalyst for chronic stress.

But here in South Africa, we face these universal professional pressures while navigating a uniquely challenging landscape. The stressors we carry are not just confined to the surgery; they are woven into the fabric of our daily lives.

The South African Burden: A Heavy Weight to Carry

Think about the weight you are carrying right now. It's more than just the responsibility for a patient's oral health.

- **The Economic Vice:** We are running small businesses in a stagnant economy. The rising costs of materials, loadshedding's relentless drain on generators and inverters, and the pressure to keep services affordable for a struggling patient base create a constant, low-grade hum of financial anxiety.
- **The Shadow of Crime:** It's the hyper-vigilance leaving the practice after a late appointment. It's the investment in security systems that feels more like a tax on doing business. This ever-present threat erodes our sense of safety and peace.
- **Complex Patient Needs:** We often see the sharp end of South Africa's socio-economic divide. Patients present with advanced conditions borne from a lack of access, forcing us into complex, often heart-wrenching clinical and ethical decisions daily.
- **Political and Systemic Uncertainty:** The constant churn of news, the uncertainty around NHI, and the fragility of our public infrastructure contribute to a pervasive sense of instability. It's exhausting.

When you combine the innate pressures of dentistry with this South African context, it's no wonder that many of us are feeling drained, irritable, disconnected, or simply... tired. Burnout isn't a personal failing; it's a logical response to an overloaded system. And the historical stigma within our profession – the "just get on with it" mentality – is a dangerous barrier to healing.

Breaking the Stigma: It's a Sign of Strength, Not Weakness

As healthcare professionals, we are brilliant at diagnosing and treating problems in others, but we often neglect our own. We fear that acknowledging struggle is a sign of incompetence or weakness. I am here to tell you, as your CEO, that the opposite is true. Recognising your own distress and taking steps to address it is the ultimate sign of professional strength and personal courage.

Seeking help is not an admission of defeat. It is a strategic, proactive step to preserve your most valuable clinical asset: your own mind.

What SADA is Doing: A Hand Reaching Out

SADA has heard your concerns, and we are moving beyond mere awareness to concrete action. Our commitment to your well-being is now a central pillar of our strategy.

A Call to Action: For Ourselves and For Each Other

My message to you today is simple, yet urgent: **Your well-being is non-negotiable.**

I urge you to look out for one another. Check in on your colleagues. If you notice someone struggling, reach out. That simple act of human connection can be a lifeline.

We chose this profession to care for others. Let's extend that same compassion to ourselves and to our colleagues. By prioritising our mental health, we are not just saving ourselves; we are safeguarding the future of a resilient, compassionate, and sustainable dental profession in South Africa.

Yours in solidarity,



Chief Executive Officer
South African Dental Association