As dental professionals we face many daily stressors that we are aware of, but we also face some that we may not even recognize. Certified Stress Management Coach, Jen Butler, offered to help shed some light on the prevalence of stress in dentistry and ways to cope. She answered questions our editor, Dr. Shahnaz Ahmed, posed on the subject and in a two-part series she will help us take a look at the signs of stress, along with the impact stress has on the dental practitioner.

STRESS IN DENTISTRY

Dr. Shahnaz Ahmed: How prevalent is stress in dentistry?

Jen Butler: From surveys and studies conducted, 86% of dentists claim moderate to severe stress. This correlates to 60 days out of every year dentists are so impacted by their stress they disengage from the patient experience so much they lose focus, miss possible treatment, don’t gain case acceptance, or even delay starting necessary treatment because they don’t have the energy or mental capacity to do their jobs. Depending on their ability to navigate and recoup from each stressor, stressors pile up and the stress piles on.

What keeps stress prevalent in dentistry is the culture of dentistry. Dentists are fix-it people and they think they can and should be able to fix themselves, their team, and their business. When they can’t figure out solutions to their problems, instead of reaching out and partnering up with a mentor, consultant, or coach, they further isolate themselves- due to embarrassment, intimidation, and fear of being exposed as a failure to their family and colleagues- by skipping study club meetings, ignoring phone calls, and offering the proverbial, “I’m fine,” when asked how they are doing. It’s a stress cycle that leads to burnout.

SA: What are the major causes of stress for a dentist?

JB: In working with hundreds of dentists over the years, I have discovered most stressors dentists with high stress experience are from one of five places:

- Time pressures, patient demands, uncooperative patients (children, fearful, nervous or militant), high levels of concentration and focus, team issues

Although these are common triggers reported by dentists, the reality is each dentist has his or her own stressors depending upon the skills they have to resolve a situation and the number of tools and resources he or she can mobilize to create solutions.

SIGNS OF STRESS

SA: What are the signs of stress for a dentist?

JB: Dentists are taught in dental school that if a patient presents with A, B & C symptoms and have D & E clinical findings, they have F. Stress is not that way, which is why the number of dentists that allow their stress to get to the severe and burnout levels is so massive. Instead of looking for ‘stress’, dentists must become more aware of what stress looks and feels like in their lives. It’s different for each dentist. Some of the common things I hear from a dentist under stress is:

- **Loss of Energy** - “I have the hardest time getting up and going to work every day. I feel anxious or dread in the pit of my stomach. When I’m there, I have to force myself to start treatment because I would rather schedule than start same day. After each patient I run into my office and hide.”

- **Loss of Focus** - “I don’t know why I just can’t seem to focus on anything. I’m all over the place! I’ll enter notes and when I go back and read what I put in, it’s nonsense. SQUIRREL! I’m totally spacing out. Sometimes I’ll arrive home and realize I don’t remember the drive.”

- **Loss of Concentration** - “Crown preps used to take me 10 minutes. Lately my assistant is telling me to hurry because I’m going over 20! Procedures I used to do with my eyes closed now take every ounce of concentration I can muster.”

- **Forgetfulness** - “I find myself looking at x-rays and having to go back again and again because I forgot what I just looked at. I’ll be reading and have to go back and read the same sentence or page several times because I have no idea what I just read.

There are also the common stress signs:

- **Physical** - headaches, muscle tension, stomach distress, frequent illnesses, fatigue
- **Mental** - overwhelm, self-doubt, decreased self-assuredness, worry, insomnia
- **Emotional** - irritability, anxiousness, apathy, indifference
SA: When do signs of stress first show up?
JB: Signs of stress show up in phases that culminates into chronic stress. It begins with psychological stress, defined simply as stress we put on ourselves by our way of thinking. In their undergrad, dentists typically put themselves under so much mental pressure to live up to expectations, have fear of failure and thoughts of ‘not being good enough’ that they develop habits that reinforce severe psychological stress. This type of stress is the least discussed and last addressed and yet it is the first type dentists form.

Upon entering dental school, dentists acquire another form of stress called physiological stress, the most difficult form of stress to recognize. The simple definition is those things we do to our physical bodies that is unhealthy. The really sad thing here is those habits dentists relied on to get them through dental school and cope with their psychological stress, was actually propelling them deeper into their stress cycle. Sitting in awkward positions for long durations, smoking, drinking, excessive exercise, and extended hours of strenuous eye use are all behaviors that lead to physiological stress.

Dentists graduate and as they begin their practice careers they experience a lifestyle that creates situational stress, the most common form of stress. Situational stress comes when events, activities and situations occur in our daily life that brings out a stress response. Now imagine an average day in a dental practice. How many moments of frustration, irritation, overwhelm, discontent, and exacerbation dentists have. Each of those moments adds to stress levels, making additional deposits into the situational stress column.

IMPACT OF STRESS

SA: What is the relationship between stress/addiction/suicide in dentistry?
JB: There is a strong correlation between stress, addiction, depression and suicide in dentistry. Of dentists with moderate to severe stress, 74.7% stated they believe it is difficult to seek help from an outside professional. With this mentality, dentists rely on those coping methods that got them through other difficult times to help them navigate all stress. Surveys and studies report findings 15% of dentists show positive for alcoholism (7.4% general), 11.1% have alcoholic tendencies (9.2% general), and 19.8% self proclaim they drink too much (16.9% general). When something is so common among peers, such as drinking to cope with stress, it’s normal to overlook the behavior as feeding into the very problem you are trying to avoid.

Now let’s look at these stats and the story they tell. With 86% of dentists having moderate/severe stress AND 74.7% refuse to seek professional support, they turn to what they know works to reduce their stress. Without realizing it, what was nothing more than a maladaptive coping method turns into a full blown addiction, which compounds stress. This goes on for years until it becomes chronic stress, then depression and finally burnout. Still coming from the mentality that they don’t seek help, some dentists see no other way out but suicide.

SA: How does stress translate into their personal and professional life?
JB: The behaviors a dentists displays due to stress does not change from work to home. The big difference are the consequences. At work when the dentist disengages from the patient experience there are 2-20 other dental professionals that can help fill in the gaps to capture treatment, case acceptance, collect payments, etc. The dentist can seclude themselves in his or her office for much of the day because their team will pick up the slack. By having other professional adults, a dentist can go years feeling stuck and weighed down by stress without having catastrophic results.

The personal life is often more fragile. Stress is likely to have significant consequences more quickly because the role of the dentist becomes highlighted and less supported by others. If a dentist disengages at home- same behavior due to stress- family and friends fill in the gaps short term but become less tolerant of the behavior faster. Relationships become strained, communication stops, crucial conversations don’t occur, and the personal life crumbles. This only provides the dentist more evidence for psychological stress, they rely on habits of coping which fuels physiological stress, and each situation/event outside of work adds to the situational stress.

STRESS & YOUR PRACTICE

SA: When the dentist is stressed, how does it impact the team and patients?
JB: When the dentist is stressed the team jumps in and picks up the slack. They have to work harder to guide the doctor through his or her day, which takes more physical work and a whole lot more mental muscle. The team spends more and more time driving the doc to perform their role and they begin to lose their primary focus, patients. Patients begin to feel it as each appointment becomes less and less about them. They miss feeling the attention and focus the office use to give and think about going elsewhere. Sometimes the tension can be so palpable it creates additional anxiety and nervousness from an already anxious and nervous patient. This seals the deal and the patient requests their records for another office.

Here’s the big aha moment for readers. What most dentists think is the root cause of their problems- lack of new patients, team drama, cancellations, financial, etc.- often is not their real problem. Each of those situations independently are problems. When they converge together it means they are a result of a larger issue. In my experience as a practice management consultant and stress management coach the root cause is 100% unidentified and unaddressed stress. This is why so many dentists go through a number of dental consultants, workshops, programs, and seminars without seeing permanent results. They aren’t fixing the right problem.

about the author

Jen Butler, M.Ed., CPC, BCC works exclusively with dental professionals as a Master and Board Certified Stress Management Coach and Practice Management Consultant. She is available as a coach, consultant, speaker, and trainer. To learn more about her services and sign up for her monthly StressLESS newsletter go to www.jenbutlercoaching.com. Take the Dental Stress Self-Assessment at www.jenbutlercoaching.com/quiz/ to find out your stress levels. Contact Jen Butler directly at 623.776.6715 or jen@jenbutlercoaching.com.