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Managing Stress

OFFICE OF STUDENT AFFAIRS

studentaffairs@ada.org
800 621.8099 x7470

As a dental student, you may feel stress and anxiety more than you have ever experienced before. Stress doesn't always manifest itself as tension or anxiety. Consider these sneaky stress disguises:

- **Attention** - do you feel a sudden need to text a friend or hit the vending machine?
- **Mood** - do you feel more pessimistic than when you started a project? Has your excitement turned into frustration?
- **Energy Level** - do you suddenly feel very sleepy?
- **Body** - do you experience sudden headache, backache or heartburn for no reason?

Stress is like bad weather—you can't avoid it altogether, but you can mitigate its negative effects.

While stress is inevitable, certain coping mechanisms are a warning sign. Coping with stress by using any of these behaviors indicates a need for professional help. Consult a physician if you experience any of these symptoms:

- Isolation
- Dropping out of school
- Abusing alcohol or other drugs
- Harming self or others

While stress is universal, solutions are individual. Some of these approaches may make sense for you; others may not be a good fit.

Common Dental School Stressors

Do any of these stories sound like yours?

1. Competition

"I was always at the top of my class in undergrad and high school, but now in dental school, everyone appears to be just as smart as me or smarter! I'm quickly learning of my classmates who had higher DAT scores, better GPAs, and seem to have much more disciplined study habits. How do I compete with that? How do I judge if I'm doing well? Am I excelling or am I average? And is average good enough to get through dental school and succeed in dentistry?"

As a student, you have probably been accustomed to being one of the smartest one in the room. That's one of the reasons you were accepted into dental school! Now almost everybody is like you and you probably have to work a lot harder to hold your own.

Remedies to Consider

Remember that individuals respond to stress in different ways—a high pressure situation might bring out peak performance in you, while having debilitating effects on a peer. In another situation, those responses could be the opposite. Thankfully, being a great dentist is not about test scores or class rank, but a combination of clinical skills, oral health knowledge and compassion for patients

Don't forget that you're in dental school for a reason. You made it there (not an easy task!) because you had the necessary scores, skills and qualities.

Reach out to practicing dentists. Many states have a New Dentist Committee with professionals who have been out of school ten years or less. Your state can connect you with a mentor.

Additional Help

Also, don't be afraid to reach out to faculty, administration, advisors, fellow students, or even practicing dentists for help. Even though competition among classmates is evident, more often than not, students are willing to help each other. Working well with others is a skill you will use throughout your career as a dentist. If someone seems to excel in a certain area, don't hesitate to ask for helpful tips. Consider approaching a faculty member if you're having problems— faculty is there *for you*, and will address questions and concerns that you may have. In addition, there are many practicing dentists who would be happy to mentor you through dental school and beyond.

ADA Help

If you don't already have personal relationships with dentists, reach out to the local or state society in your dental school's state, and ask. You may want to specifically ask if that state dental society has a New Dentist Committee, which consists of practicing dentists who are fewer than 10 years out of dental school. You might be surprised at the help that another person could provide who's been where you are now. If you're looking for a mentor dentist and can't find one, call the ADA or your state dental society, and we'll help you find one. For a complete listing of state dental societies and their contact information, visit www.ada.org/stateorganizations.aspx or call the ADA at (800) 621-8099.

"One of the ways in which I was able to work being kind to myself back into my crazy life was to start having study groups that were centered around home cooked meals. In this way we could have discussion and communication about course work, bouncing questions and ideas off of each other, and make it a true collaborative event!"

Rena Christman
Class of 2012

Arizona School of Dentistry and Oral Health

2. Uncertainty/Fear of Failure

"I am completely lost and feel like I'm behind. At times, I feel like I have no idea what I'm doing. Will I ever learn all of this? Will I ever be able to do this correctly? Dental school is tougher than I thought, and now I'm wondering if I've chosen the right career path."

It's natural to wonder, "Will I ever be able to do this correctly?"

Many of the skills in dentistry, especially the hand skills, are different from any tasks you may have attempted in the past. If that wasn't enough, you are expected to perfect these skills quickly!

Remedies to Consider

Everything takes time and practice. You might be able to rollerblade, flip an omelet, parallel park or throw a Frisbee without a second thought because you went through the learning curve a long time ago. With patience and time you'll develop the same muscle memory in dentistry.

You can always chunk a big project into smaller pieces. Concentrate on what you need to do today and this week, not where you should be at the end of term.

Talk to someone who has been there before. In addition to seasoned dentists, you can also talk with older students. Not only can you improve your skills, technique and efficiency, you can avoid teaching yourself bad habits early on.

ADA Help

Your state and local dental societies are full of practicing dentists who might be willing to share advice, as well as information about resources specific to your particular area that may help you overcome some of the fears. Attend a meeting, register for a conference or spend the day with a dentist to observe how his/her practice is run. These things may help you formulate a stronger opinion about your capabilities, capacity for learning, and personality as it relates to working with patients – which might relieve a few of your fears.

If you're looking for a mentor dentist and can't find one, call the ADA or your state dental society, and we'll help you find one. For a complete listing of state dental societies and their contact information, visit www.ada.org/stateorganizations.aspx or call the ADA at (800) 621-8099.

“Learning this material isn't about getting from point A to point B, or from dental school to a residency. It's about understanding its core and applying it to every patient we see when we become dentists. Reminding myself of that can be motivating and humbling, and can make you zoom out and see the big picture when you're stressed about one little exam.”

Ramya Kanukollu
Class of 2013
Columbia University College of Dental Medicine

3. Finances/Debt

“I have \$170,000 worth of student loans stacking up, \$15,000 in credit cards, a \$12,000 balance on my car and a \$200,000 mortgage. To top things off, I can't even make ends meet now and I haven't begun to make student loan payments yet! Will dentistry help me pay down the debt I've incurred, and how long will it take? When will I get to a point where I'm comfortable with my debt and not worrying about how to pay my bills, take care of my family, live the way I want to live and not be stretched financially?”

Remedies to Consider

A spending plan isn't a recipe for drudgery. It's a roadmap that allows you to control your finances, instead of your finances controlling you. The skills you use as a student when preparing a spending plan become essential when you begin to practice—consider this to be one more part of your dental education.

Here's how to get started. First you need to estimate your expenses. If you are like most people, you have a pretty good handle on your rent, utilities, and insurance, anything that comes with a bill. Everything else—groceries, household, entertainment, miscellaneous, is probably a guess. That's okay—just make a note of your guesses.

Step two is to track your actual expenses. Everything from a credit card payment to a parking meter, write it down. Three months is great, one week is better than nothing. Write it down. You'll use this data to refine your spending plan. Maybe you estimated that you spend \$35 a week on groceries when the real total is closer to \$75.

Ultimately we all have to live within our means, and a spending plan helps you with that

goal. But tracking expenses helps you see if your priorities are reflected in your spending. For instance, maybe your favorite way to unwind is to go to the movies, but you've stopped going because it seems too expensive. If your expense tracking shows that you spend \$25 a week grabbing breakfast on the run, consider eating breakfast at home and spending the money where you enjoy it—at the movies.

Each person is different and your luxury may be someone else's necessity.

And finally, keep on track. Most spending plans can accommodate a double latte, a new pair of shoes and concert tickets, but your plan may not accommodate all of them at the same time. When major changes happen—and they will—step back and adjust your plan accordingly.

These skills will make sure that you are well positioned to enjoy all the material benefits that come with your future career in dentistry.

ADA Help

The ADA Office of Student Affairs distributes *Financial Planning Issues for Dental Students* to the dean's office of each dental school in July for the incoming first year class. It covers educational debt, loan repayments, strategies and credit reporting. It also breaks down terms such as compound interest, and will show you how to estimate your total educational loan payments. To request a copy of *Financial Planning Issues for Dental Students*, contact the ADA Office of Student Affairs at studentaffairs@ada.org or (800) 621-8099, x7470.

4. Relationship Balance/Social Life/Peer Pressure

*"My spouse says I'm neglecting him/her, my mom says I never call and Scruffy is destroying all of my furniture and shoes because I don't play with him the way I used to. Or, my friends want me to hang out more, and I'd like to get to know this certain individual a little better, but how will I ever find the time to date? And if I turn down one more invitation for **another** social event, I'll lose every friend I have."*

Most dentists in private practice report that they work just under 40 hours a week and they enjoy a high degree of control over their own schedules. However, we know that dental school is not a time when you enjoy a high degree of control over your schedule!

Let's get real—dental school is an enormous commitment of time. Balancing school with your personal life is always difficult and, at times, it may be impossible.

Remedies to Consider

Here's the bad news. While you are in school you won't get to say "yes," to every invitation. Remember, dental school lasts a short time, but friends and family keep going for decades.

Because there is so much work to do, it's easy to let work take over your life. That's why it can be a good idea to schedule in some non-work time. Maybe you want to set aside time for a loved one, or maybe you want to set a boundary for yourself like "no work after noon on Saturdays." You may find that not only do you enjoy the break; but that you work more efficiently during the time you are busy.

Additional Help

People who are effective with time do more, earlier. They put the bulk of work at the beginning, not at the end. We have a word for putting the bulk of the work at the end and that word is "procrastination." Put most of your work earlier in your schedule

This means getting more done earlier in the day, with fewer all-nighters. It means doing more on Mondays and Tuesdays, rather than finishing things up on Sunday. It means having the time to relax instead of worrying about finishing in time.

Put your important work first. And put your most difficult work first. Find those items on your list that are most likely to produce procrastination and do them first.

“Dental school is what you make it to be—totally academic, totally social, or somewhere in between. I found that deliberately setting a time period of focused study lets me deliberately take a break without feeling guilty!”

Trent Clifton
Class of 2012
Arizona School of Dentistry and Oral Health

5. Fitness and Nutrition

“All I seem to be eating lately is fast food, and I never seem to have enough time to get to the gym, or even run a couple of miles like I used to. My body is changing, and so is my energy level because I’m not exercising, not eating right and not giving my body the attention it deserves.”

Remedies to Consider

As a medical professional, you know what you should do when it comes to exercise and nutrition. The real challenge is doing the right thing on a consistent basis while meeting all your other commitments.

If you don’t already enjoy cooking, dental school is probably not the easiest time to learn. If the kitchen is not your comfort zone, keep a variety of healthy components on hand to mix and match.

Baby carrots, some leftover salmon, a piece of whole wheat bread spread with peanut butter— this is not what your grandparents would have called a meal, but it’s balanced and it’s faster and cheaper than ordering a pizza.

Pre-plan proteins— turkey slices, seasoned tofu, frozen fish fillets, and rotisserie chickens are low-maintenance.

Exercise is like nutrition—you know what you are supposed to do, but finding the time to do it may be difficult. Remember that “preventative maintenance” now will help you stay healthy throughout your career.

You may not have the time to swim laps or go for a jog. Consider doing higher intensity cardio for a shorter period of time, such as spinning or skipping rope

If you enjoy yoga or Pilates but have difficulty attending a regular class, try an instructional video. You’ll find free videos online; experiment until you find some favorites

For strength training without equipment, try body weight exercises such as push-ups. An online search for “body weight workout” will give you several suggestions of things to do in your apartment.

And, of course, it’s a great idea to make a commitment with a fellow student to work out

together!

“As a time-crunched dental student, I like to multitask my activities. Two priorities to me include exercising and maintaining friendships. My favorite way to combine the two? Running with my friends! I can’t tell you how many miles have slipped by in the company of friends and I come home refreshed, having killed two birds with one stone.

Kallie Law
Class of 2012
University of Alabama-Birmingham

6. Neglecting Everyday Responsibilities

“I forgot to pay my cell phone bill, I never made it to the cleaners, my house is a mess, and I haven’t changed my linen in two months! I still need to take my car in for an oil change, return the DVD’s to the video store, help my little sister with applications to dental school and return phone calls from over a week ago. How can I catch up and keep up?”

Remedies to Consider

- Pick a single place in your home for your wallet, your car keys, your cell phone, everything that you need to leave the house. If you have this command center, you’ll always know where everything is, and you won’t have to start the day with a scavenger hunt.
- Here’s another tip—never park your car at night with a low tank of gas. Fill up at night; don’t add another chore to your morning rush.
- Speaking of doing things at night—if you are not a morning person, you’ve already realized that about yourself. Respect that. Pack your lunch at night, fill the coffee maker at night, lay out your wardrobe at night, and so forth. You are not going to be speedy or happy in the morning if you leave those tasks until then.
- When you make your to-do list, pretend that you are making it for a stranger. For instance, instead of writing, “Oil Change”, go ahead and write “Schedule Oil Change 312-440-7478.” When you have a spare moment, you can knock those easy items off your list because you have complete information.

Most important of all, whether you are using a PDA or a stack of index cards or any other system, *write it down*, and don’t depend on your memory. Your brain will be plenty busy without having to also remember the dry cleaning.

By enrolling in dental school, you’ve put yourself on the path to a wonderful profession. Across the country the demand for dental services is growing, and your dental education prepares you to meet this demand and develop a successful career. According to ADA, Survey Center, 2008 New Dentist Survey, 98% of new dentists are satisfied with their choice of profession, and 47% describe themselves as extremely satisfied.

Additional resources to consider:

- Consult your university’s student health services
- The Franklin Institute maintains a collection of stress-busting tactics online: <http://www.fi.edu/learn/brain/relieve.html>

- The Mayo Clinic hosts a comprehensive collection of resources including both information about the harmful effects of stress, and the options for coping effectively at their Web site:
<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/stress-management/MY00435>