Time to *exhale*

by **Reena Wadia**¹

I spend a lot of my time talking to young dentists and frequently there is a common theme to some of things I hear, such as:

'Reena, I am always hitting snooze in the mornings!'
'I know I shouldn't but I skip breakfast as I never have time anymore'
'I spend my lunch break catching

up with patient notes'
'I don't go out in the evenings anymore as I'm just too tired after work'
'I really need a holiday!'

If this sounds at all familiar then don't worry, you're not the only one. I certainly recognise myself in those phrases. Four years ago, when I was just starting out in practice, I got to a point where I was mentally and physically drained every day. I used to come home with little

energy for anything apart from sleep. Even after I had slept, I still felt exhausted.

After speaking to other young dentists I slowly realised our story wasn't uncommon. Even then, it somehow made it more acceptable and I remember thinking, 'maybe this was the life of a young dentist?' And so my vicious circle of 'work, home, sleep', repeat continued.

However, several months later, I remember a particular long week crammed with difficult

I googled 'solutions for burnout' and 'dentists' but the reading material was disappointing. This led me to question more experienced colleagues. 'Have you ever felt like this?' 'What did you do?' were common questions I asked just to try and find a way out of my situation.

A reoccurring theme was the importance of downtime. Initially, downtime sounded like time wasted but it was useful to remember that we are not designed to work and expend energy continuously. We need time to recover too. Downtime is any activity that helps replenish our energy supplies. I began reading online articles on downtime and started implementing the tactics suggested by my colleagues. It wasn't as easy as it first appeared, but a few months later I began to feel the benefits. I didn't have to hit the snooze button every morning. I worked more efficiently and felt I was performing at my best for my patients. I was back on track and enjoying my career again.

patients and the effects starting to take their toll. I started questioning my own treatment plans and I was regularly too drained to complete all the clinical work I had planned for each appointment, leading to frequently running late.

I was a victim of burnout. Priding myself on being hard working this was hard to admit but the potential compromise to patient care meant this was not acceptable and something had to change.

3. Being disciplined

If I miss a downtime date, I make sure it's rescheduled in the same way as I would for another important meeting.

4. Incorporating different forms of downtime

Downtime activities vary between individuals. My optimal downtime mix includes: quick breaks, holidays, exercise, and socialising.

(a) Quick breaks – Even if I'm running a few minutes late during the day, I often have a quick stretch or close my eyes for a minute.

(b) Holidays – Time away from work, even for a few days, is a great way to unwind. I plan my holidays well in advance – I used to wait till the last minute to book time off when I was already drained and so I didn't feel the full benefits of the holiday.

(c) Exercise – Exercise burns up the excess

**'WE ALL UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF
HIGH QUALITY PATIENT CARE, BUT IT'S
CLEAR THAT THE NECESSITY FOR DOWNTIME
IS EQUALLY AS IMPERATIVE'**

We all understand the importance of high quality patient care, but it's clear that the necessity for downtime is equally as imperative. Here are a few of the downtime techniques that have worked for me and may work for you too:

1. Scheduling

I wasn't naturally inclined to slowing down and taking a break so it was useful to create a schedule where I planned other activities besides work. Events on my schedule are colour-coded: red for 'work' and blue for 'play'. At a glance, this helps me to gauge if I'm giving myself enough time for 'play' or renewal to balance the performance demands of that particular day or week. Try this and then evaluate how you feel on a week or fortnightly basis.

2. Making time

Initially I struggled to squeeze in any downtime. I then re-evaluated my routine and re-prioritised. Activities that would give me the most energy were given highest priority. This also meant I had to say "no" to less important invitations, which wasn't easy at first.

adrenaline resulting from stress, allowing the body to return to a steady state. It also releases endorphins, which give us the 'feel good factor'. I find it helpful to pick exercises that I enjoy as this keeps me motivated.

(d) Socialising – Spending time with the most positive people I can find and supporting them too helps keep my energy levels high.

Let me know if any of the above work for you and I'd love to hear your tips too! It is a challenging time for dentists - young and senior alike - but we need to do everything we can to look after our patients and ourselves. So if you're feeling overwhelmed and a little like you're suffocating then remember to take time to exhale.

¹ Specialty trainee in Periodontology at Guy's Hospital,

Associate Dentist at Harley Street Dental Studio & Woodford Dental Care,
Clinical tutor at Barts & The London.

bdjteam2015131