A GUIDE TO MANAGING STRESS FOR DENTAL STUDENTS

By David Rahman, Mind coach

Stress can be defined as the feelings associated with excessive mental and emotional pressure. As a dental student, you will easily be familiar with pressure.

One common problem that exists is the inability to recognise stress, and the subsequent resulting failure in dealing with the cause of this stress. Repeated episodes in stress can result in feelings of anxiety. Left untreated, this can play havoc in your personal and student life.

Many dental students when entering the university environment suddenly experience a problem. They are no longer 'top dog' as they were in the school environment. This can lead to either feelings of lack of self-worth, or the need to prove themselves at this higher level. This relentless need to prove oneself can result in lack of self-care and feelings of being overwhelmed.

This begs the question, 'Why are some students not acknowledging there's a problem?' To some students acknowledging a problem can be perceived as a sign of weakness. Opening up about the failure to be able to cope with pressure, work and even life can be seen by some students as an admission of 'not being good enough' or a sign of fallibility. Some students that I have worked with have originally equated vulnerability with appearing weak.

Unfortunately these repeating behaviours which then cause high levels of stress can eventually trigger the AHPA (amygdala – hypothalamus – pituitary gland – adrenal gland) axis. If the resultant fight, flight or freeze response is repeatedly triggered, then there becomes a danger of panic attacks occurring in time.

The first step in change is awareness.

A quick method to identify stress would be to examine your current behaviours. In a notebook just answer the following questions:

- What's not working for me currently?

Is your assessment late, lack of focus and concentration, deteriorating results, persistently in a hurry, feeling frozen at times?

- How have I been feeling this last seven days? Are you always in a hurry, unable to problem solve without feeling stuck, reading a book yet unable to absorb or retain the information?
- What in my life am I most focussed on? Is it a relationship, proving others wrong, anger at someone, people pleasing?

The next step is to acknowledge that there is a problem. In many cases this is like the 'proverbial weight off the shoulders'. It can feel hugely relieving. Unfortunately we can feel so consumed with what we feel others would think that we feel hesitant in coming forward for help.

Speak to a trusted friend or lecturer. You will be surprised at how these people really would love to help you get through this. You can soon discover that the conversation that you had been playing in your head all this time was pure fiction. After all, how many times in your life have you worried and built something up in your mind, only to say at the end 'that was not as bad as I thought'.

Here are three simple yet powerful strategies that can help you de-stress at any moment.

Breathe: During moments of stress and panic our breathing can be shallow and laboured. This is when the sympathetic nervous system has been activated. Take a deep breath through the nose and hold for three seconds. Then exhale out fully before waiting two seconds. Then repeat three times. This method will reactivate the parasympathetic system, eventually leaving you in a more relaxed state.

We often say 'I have worked myself up into a state!' If at any point you feel that this has

happened, then try this. Stand up and imagine there is a tubular band of red light surrounding you from the floor up to a level just above your head. Now raise your hands and starting at the top of the red tube of light physically push it down slowly around you. At the point that you have pushed it below your knees, step over this circular tube. Now imagine this circular tube of light is behind you and starting to melt away into nothing. I remember teaching this to a waitress in a diner once who was clearly experiencing a highly stressful moment. Her whole demeanour changed when she employed this technique. She reported feeling 90% calmer almost straight away.

Grab a piece of A4 paper. Draw a line down the middle. Now write down in the left-hand column what is on your mind. Write down your prevailing thoughts and feelings. Even examining where you are focussed, what is overwhelming you and identifying it, can be a breakthrough. Following this, in the right-hand column, place an action needed to be taken next to each particular thought. e.g. I have to get a gift for Danny's birthday, but I have no time as I have to get my assignment finished. Being action and solution focussed gives you back control of your time.

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