Looking after our health and wellbeing

Dental professionals need support and advice for stress and anxiety caused by the pandemic, says **Alison Large**, dento-legal adviser at the Dental Defence Union (DDU).

While dentistry can be a fulfilling career, it can also be a stressful occupation which may lead to dental professionals feeling anxious, depressed, poorly motivated or at risk of burnout. Unfortunately, the COVID pandemic has heightened these feelings. Many are concerned about being unable to practise and treat their patients, coupled with worries about their finances and the health and wellbeing of their loved ones. Some dental professionals have also worked in unfamiliar surroundings, for example, in an urgent dental care centre or volunteering to help the NHS in other ways.

The Dental Defence Union (DDU) recently surveyed 224 of our dental members and found that 68% believed that their stress and anxiety levels have increased since the beginning of the pandemic.¹ Indeed, 67% said that they previously felt stressed or anxious at least once a week while 47% said that they had previously gone to work when they did not feel well. Additionally, 52% felt they were unable to spend adequate time with their patients while 49% believed that they were unable to do their jobs effectively.

Reaching out for support and advice can be daunting and difficult but dental professionals shouldn't have to 'just deal with it'. At the DDU we recommend that dental professionals make the most of their support network to help them deal with stress, anxiety or depression.

Eighty-eight percent of members surveyed stated that they share concerns about their health and wellbeing with family while 57% share concerns with their colleagues; as well as supporting you, colleagues may also be able to help reduce the pressures you're facing at work.

Forty-two percent of dental professionals also stated that they would discuss their

health and wellbeing with their GP. A GP can give objective advice about how to prevent and manage any health concerns you might have.

The General Dental Council (GDC) expects dental professionals to look after their own health in the interests of providing safe and appropriate care. Paragraph 9.2.2 of the GDC's *Standards for the dental team* states: 'You must not rely on your own assessment of the risk you pose to patients. You should seek occupational health advice or other appropriate advice as soon as possible.'²

In the DDU's experience, the GDC is sympathetic towards registrants with health problems providing they co-operate with health assessments and show insight. With the appropriate supervision and support, many dental professionals with health problems will be able to continue working.

The DDU has recently launched a new e-learning module³ to support our members with their health and wellbeing. The course enables dental professionals to recognise the signs of anxiety and depression, develop the skills needed to handle stressful situations and learn how they can support colleagues. Moreover, the DDU has a 24-hour helpline and our expert advisers who are dental professionals themselves understand the pressures you face and can support you with dento-legal issues.

As well as the assistance the DDU is able to give to members, there are a number of other organisations and bodies to whom dental professionals can turn in times of need. These include: the NHS Practitioner Health Programme (PHP) (<https://www.practitionerhealth.nhs.uk/>) which has set up a special COVID-19 wellbeing service⁴ with specific advice and resources for healthcare professionals; occupational health services; the Dentists' Health Support Programme (DHSP)⁵ and the Samaritans.⁶ Some free mindfulness techniques are also available

online from The Mindfulness Initiative.⁷

As dental professionals return to work in the 'new normal', it is more important than ever before to look after our own and our colleagues' health and wellbeing.

References

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