

The importance of wellbeing in dentistry



Priya Sharma¹ explores the meaning of 'wellbeing' and 'mindfulness' and how we can create an equilibrium of our personal and professional lives.

What is wellbeing?

Wellbeing is defined as a state of being both healthy and happy. The World Health Organisation (WHO) constitution states: 'Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'.¹ Clearly the concept is holistic and multi-faceted. The WHO clarifies this further by stating that wellbeing is both subjective (individual's experience of their life) and objective (comparison of life circumstances

with social norms and values). Examples of life circumstance include physical and psychological health, work, social relationships, work-life balance amongst others.

The narrative surrounding wellbeing has changed. There is now a worldwide awareness and precedence being rightly given to the importance of wellbeing in both personal and professional spheres.

Prevention

There has been a greater emphasis in society on wellbeing, particularly addressing the various factors that can impact mental health and paying attention to how you feel, think and behave. It is thought that mental health exists on a spectrum. Look for signs that are different to how you usually feel. There is an abundance of information on the internet but be careful not to self-diagnose. Awareness and insight into your own mental health will allow you to seek appropriate help.

Work-life balance

Creating an equilibrium of your professional and personal life may seem like an art in itself but in reality, it is taking a step back and assessing the whole canvas. Planning and preparation will help in having sight of the bigger picture. Prioritising what needs to be done can be a helpful tool. Identifying what really matters is just as relevant.

Self-care

Self-care should be made a priority; taking small steps will have a significant impact on our life.

Maintain an exercise routine and well-balanced diet. Just a quick walk in the middle of the day over lunch can help. Never underestimate the power of fresh air and simple exercise. This will boost your energy levels and motivate you for the rest of your day.

Quick stretching exercises such as touching your toes or gently rolling your head

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other multitude of life stresses and the never-ending to-do list. This is not to say that one must become complacent but rather stop interweaving all of one's life stresses into the present. Staying grounded in the present moment will help impart a certain level of calm. Be free of negative thoughts. In essence, step away from approaching all thought process through your autopilot lens.

To begin, simply become conscious and bring your full attention to the task at hand. This is not to say that you need to stop multi-tasking but see everything you do with a new set of eyes, as if it was your first time. Remember not to pass judgement on the activity at hand. Do take note of your thoughts but not in a negative light. Reflect and assess what can be improved next time. Learn and expand your knowledge.

Concentrating on your breathing allows one to be fully present in the now. Do this throughout the day and let this simple mindful strategy be incorporated into your daily routine.

Resilience

Simply put, resilience is your ability to bounce-back despite challenging circumstances and adversity. Much focus has been attributed in society to this quality but it is in fact a very personal response and it is different for everybody.

The place to start is recognising your circumstance is genuine. Reflect on the times in the past where you have been resilient and gain strength from this. Actively address the situation as it will not fix itself. Seek help if you feel it is appropriate. Always be kind to yourself regardless of your circumstance.

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are helpful de-stressors and can be done at any time.

Share your feelings with friends and family you feel comfortable with. A supportive social circle can help you deal with particular stressors and provide a different perspective in a compassionate atmosphere.

Reflect on your own personal needs; engage and listen to your body. Small changes will empower you and have a positive impact on your health. Seek professional help when required.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is intentionally, non-judgementally, paying attention to the present moment.

According to the organisation Mind, this important way of thinking involves 'making a special effort to notice what's happening in the present moment (in your mind, body and surroundings) – without judging anything'.

It aims to help you:

- Feel calmer and less stressed
- Feel more able to choose how to respond to your thoughts and feelings
- Cope with difficult or unhelpful thoughts
- Be kinder towards yourself.

Peacefully confront and stay in the present moment. Do not begin thinking about the

Accept that no one is perfect and that there is always room for improvement. Awareness and acceptance of the present moment will allow you to take positive control without any associated stress.

Your attentiveness will allow patients to feel they are being fully cared for. In addition, mindfulness will improve your patient interactions, active listening and empathy.

Become aware and approach each task with an open mind. Step back and assess the bigger picture. Do not contaminate the present with all the other stresses in your life. Open the door to calm. This will take practice. Small steps will lead to overt benefits until it becomes the way you live your life both professionally and personally.

Breathe

This does not require a special course or skill – simply pay attention to your breath. This in itself will let you pause for at least a few seconds. As you take your breath, be conscious of the air entering through your nose... lungs... replenishing... rejuvenating... exhale... feel the stresses leave your body... breathe out fully.

Dentistry and wellbeing

Dental professionals are well aware to prioritise a patient's oral health and wellbeing. In the past concerns about mental health and wellbeing were never openly discussed but fortunately we now see a more transparent and positive conversation. The paradigm has shifted. We now have open conversations surrounding wellbeing. The very fabric of our professional and personal lives must be interwoven with wellbeing at its heart. The place to start is to create platforms where there are open discussions surrounding mental health at the workplace ensuring there is no stigma attached and no one is negatively judged. Indeed, dental team wellbeing is directly related to patient experience of oral health care. Dental practices should foster a culture where there is active promotion and management of health and wellbeing of all members of staff at the practice.

Mental Health Wellness in Dentistry is an initiative that is 'dedicated to supporting and driving the need to look differently at mental health in the workplace. Its guiding philosophy is to ensure that there is a whole

‘Dental practices should foster a culture where there is active promotion and management of health and wellbeing of all members of staff at the practice.’

team approach to mental health wellness in the workplace and that ‘early intervention and safe signposting’ is a given.’ Their website is particularly helpful.²

Wellbeing Lead

Dental practices should consider appointing a Wellbeing Lead who will be able to help staff identify the signs and potential symptoms of poor mental health and where people can seek appropriate support. The Wellbeing Lead is not considered to have a specialisation in the field of mental health but rather engage in confidential discussions with staff and signpost them to where they can seek support. It is suggested that the Lead undertakes training as a Mental Health First Aider. Practices should carry out a confidential wellbeing survey of all staff; this may help shed light on particular workplace concerns. A mental wellbeing action plan at practice level should be created that focuses on early intervention and signposting. The dental team should receive stress awareness training. Small steps at the practice can lead to a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of individuals.

Dental team wellbeing

Fostering an environment where holistic health is a priority will clearly reflect in the happiness and cohesiveness of the dental team. Creating a safe space to discuss all realms of mental health will help reduce the stigma, potentially identify triggers earlier whilst providing direction of seeking help. This will create a resilient and cohesive dental team, better engagement and satisfaction at work. This may also allow individuals to seek further perspective and insight on their personal lives as well.

Work initiatives

The dental practice should create a culture where a solid team develops. Hierarchies and boundaries should not exist. All members of the practice have unique and equally important roles. There should be a shared

sense of identity and purpose. This common vision is what ties the dental team together. Encouraging social interaction is important; be creative and discover new platforms to team build.

The practice may choose to carry out charitable work or volunteering as a way to give back and create solidarity at the practice. Consider organising the team to take on a community project which will have a positive impact.

The dental practice may offer external mental health courses such as the mental health first aider course or workshops. Asking members what type of education they will benefit from and arranging this may prove to be fruitful. This could be tailored to various staff or for all members of the practice. These will not only benefit the personal lives of dental team members but also their professional lives.

A quick internet search will reveal many companies who provide innovative ideas.

Conclusion

Incorporating wellbeing in both one’s personal and professional lives will create individuals who can persevere. By participating in transparent conversation on mental health and wellbeing we can move forward as a society as a whole to remove the stigma previously and wrongly attached to these conversations. Empowering individuals and dental teams in their journey is paramount.

References

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