Stress in dentistry – a study

Clinical hypnotherapist Joanna Taylor investigates managing stress in the dental team

It is well known that dentistry is a stressful profession, but just what causes the stress, and to what extent does it affect the rest of the team? To this end, in late 2011 I invited dental professionals to take part in a study to determine some of the major causes of stress within the dental team; the survey also asked what effects stress had on the lives of the respondents, and what measures, if any, they took to help manage or reduce their stress.

**Key facts – the survey says...**

- 45% of dentist respondents said they suffer with insomnia.
- 52% of all respondents said stress affected personal or family relationships.
- 60% of all respondents said stress affected personal or family relationships.
- 49% of dentist listed running late as their main cause of stress.
- 63% of all respondents said stress had an impact on their motivation.
- 60% of all respondents said stress affected personal or family relationships.
- 49% of dentists use sport as a stress management tool.

**Survey results**

Of the 347 respondents, 178 were principal or associate dentists and the remaining 169 were DCPs and other members of the dental team. Of the dentists who took part, over a third (36%) stated that they were stressed about their work during most working days, nearly a fifth (19%) felt stressed every day, over a quarter (28%) felt stressed between one and three times a week, 14% less than once a week and 2% reported never feeling stressed. The majority (58%) felt that there was no particular time of day which was more stressful.

Nearly half of dentists (48%) listed running late as being their main cause of stress, followed by patient complaints (32%), compliance (30%), money (29%) and work-life balance (28%). Other significant causes of stress included conflicts between team members (21%), dealing with phobic or anxious patients (20%), stress included conflicts between team members (21%), and work-life balance (26%). Other significant causes of stress included conflicts between team members (21%), dealing with phobic or anxious patients (20%), and work-life balance (26%). Other significant causes of stress included conflicts between team members (21%), dealing with phobic or anxious patients (20%), and work-life balance (26%).

The stress suffered by dentists appears to cause a significant incidence of physical symptoms, with nearly a half (45%) suffering from insomnia; other significant symptoms include tiredness (43%), anxiety (40%), bruxism (31%), headaches (30%) and depression (27%) amongst others. Only 15% stated they had experienced no physical symptoms from their stress.

By far, the most negative impact stress has had on the lives of the dentists taking part in the survey was on their motivation, with 63% of respondents being affected, and on personal or family relationships (60%), while 40% stated that relationships with work colleagues have also suffered. Nearly a third (32%) felt that their levels of concentration were reduced and, significantly, 17% felt that stress had affected their clinical standards. Only 10% of respondents felt that stress had had no negative impact on their lives.

Popular stress management tools for dentists include sport, with nearly half (49%) using this as one of their main method of stress reduction, while over a third (36%) found alcohol to be useful and 29% used reading. Techniques such as deep breathing, self-hypnosis, meditation and yoga are also popular, again being used by nearly half (45%) of respondents. Other methods used included watching television (29%) and taking medication (10%), while talking to friends and family, social networking, music, gardening and changing jobs were given as some alternatives.

**Real-life stories**

As the survey was conducted anonymously, a number of respondents felt able to give further information about the problems that work stress has caused them. They included the associate struggling to cope with unmotivated staff, who feels excluded by the partners; the therapist who is verbally attacked on a regular basis by another team member; the principal dentist who had attempted suicide, struggling with a work/life balance that gives insufficient time for the friendships outside of work that would help redress the balance.

**Root causes**

The survey demonstrates that, despite the useful techniques employed to manage it, stress is still having a significant negative impact on the health and motivation of individuals within the dental team. The key to making a difference here has to be by addressing the root cause, and the main causes of stress for the majority of the team are shown to be produced by internal factors within the practice such as running late and conflicts between team members.

These are things that are within our power to change, through improved training and communication. If your current working practices are causing stress within your team, then it is time to look at how things can be improved, and to discuss options and possible solutions. When you consider just how much that stress could be affecting your team’s motivation, clinical standards and physical health, and translate that into the effects on your patients feel respected, valued and cared for.

**Survey image**

It is a typical week, how often do you feel stressed about work?

- Never
- Occasionally
- About once a week
- About three times a week
- Over a quarter
- Every day
- Each day

- How often do you feel stressed about work?

**Survey results**

- 48% of dentists listed running late as being their main cause of stress.