

# How Can Dentists Find Peace?

Bringing mindfulness into the dental practice

The relationship between stress and dentists has been widely researched for decades. Eighty-three percent of dentists perceive dentistry as “very stressful,” while 60 percent believe it is more stressful than other professions.<sup>6,8</sup> In a 2003 survey of health-care professionals conducted by Statistics Canada, dentists ranked number five in terms of self-reported stress, when accounting for influences outside of the workplace.<sup>14</sup> What has been less discussed in the literature are ways that dentists can alleviate stress. Over the past 10 years, Canadian medical schools have included programs specifically designed to promote the well-being of physicians. Law schools have done the same. *Dental programs have not.*

This article will explore mindfulness — the tool widely used by medical and law programs to help doctors and lawyers manage the stress in their lives.

## A Review of the Stress Literature

The most cited stressors for dentists include:

1. Coping with difficult/uncooperative/anxious clients<sup>1,5,8,9,12</sup>
2. Running late, dealing with cancellations and no-shows<sup>1,5,6,9,12</sup>
3. Causing pain and/or fear to patients<sup>1,6,12</sup>
4. Patient dissatisfaction.<sup>1,5,9</sup>



The result of shouldering this stress is that more than half of dentists report feeling tense, nervous, or depressed on a “frequent,” “very frequent,” or “chronic” basis. Furthermore, they almost completely attribute this psychological discomfort to work.<sup>5,6,7</sup> So, how do dentists manage it? One study found that 24 percent “did nothing” and 13 percent “just coped.”<sup>7</sup>

## How to Manage Your Stress

Enter mindfulness. The term *mindfulness* stems from the Buddhist tradition, which has systematized practices that train the mind toward peace, wisdom and compassion. Mindfulness connotes awareness of the body, feelings, thoughts and external objects in present time, without judgment or the desire to achieve anything. Sitting meditation is a practice in mindfulness. To be aware of your thoughts and physiological reactions when dealing with an anxious patient is also to be mindful. It is only through awareness, or mindfulness, that real change can occur. Though it is a deceptively simple concept, mindfulness requires much effort and practise to perform consistently, and it is best learned with a teacher.

Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn is credited with being the pioneer in introducing mindfulness to the Western medical community in 1979. His Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction

program (MBSR) has been the flagship of programs and therapies within psychology, behavioural medicine and neurobiology that aim to reduce stress and promote healing in normal and clinical populations. Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose in the present moment and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience, moment to moment” (p.145).<sup>4</sup> Research has shown several benefits of mindfulness including stress reduction, a decrease in anxiety and depression symptoms, reduced rumination, less emotional reactivity, improved well-being, and a strengthened immune system.<sup>2</sup>

### How Does Mindfulness Work in a Dentist’s Office?

I worked with a dentist I will call Dr. GoodSport and Susan, one of his dental hygienists, for four weeks on bringing mindfulness into their lives. With eight employees and 17 years in practice, Dr. GoodSport has clear expectations about how he prefers his office to operate. “When things don’t turn out the way I would like, it bothers me”, he says. We started with a mindfulness practice called a body scan. While he sat with his eyes closed, I guided him to mentally attend to each

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body part, head to toe, and asked him to note the sensation and let go of any tension that may be present. Dr. GoodSport found it difficult to complete this homework because he was “unsure of the goal.” This apparent lack of a goal may be the biggest obstacle for dentists attempting to integrate mindfulness into their lives. Mindfulness is about *non-striving*, which is contrary to our North American orientation toward achievement. It is about becoming aware and accepting things as they are right now. Do not, however, confuse this with complacency, for through this awareness, creativity is born.

During further discussion, Dr. GoodSport reported feeling uncomfortable when dealing with patients who are non-compliant with the recommended treatment protocol, saying, “It feels like a rejection.” Enter mindfulness. I recommended that, during those times, he pay attention to what he was saying to himself and attention to his specific

bodily sensations. Frequently people are so consumed by their own reactions that they are unable to respond effectively to their patients’ concerns. The result: a critical point in building the dentist-patient relationship is lost.

*continued page 46*

## Five Ways to Incorporate Mindfulness Into Your Busy Life

Fortune 500 companies, including Google, have invited practitioners such as renowned Zen monk and author Thich Nhat Hanh to teach their employees how to develop a mindfulness practice to promote well-being in the workplace. Here are five ways for dentists to integrate mindfulness into their day.

- 1. Eat lunch mindfully.** Dentists often don’t take a quiet time, such as lunch, and residents and interns tend to be even more restrictive.<sup>7</sup> Sequester yourself for at least 15 minutes. Take full awareness of your food: smell the different fragrances; notice the textures as you chew, and note the subtle tastes of salty and sweet with each bite. No television, handheld devices, phone calls, paperwork, talking, or consultations allowed. Savour your lunch.
- 2. Breathe mindfully before each patient.** Many dentists have heavy schedules. Before you see your next patient, take five to 10 deep breaths. “Let go” of your last patient, the last procedure and your thoughts about what needs to be done next with that patient. Once all the follow-up procedures have been confirmed with your staff, take time to recalibrate and be present for your next patient.
- 3. Make mindful use of your cancellation and no-show time.** What story are you creating around the cancellation or no-show? Put it through the following test: 1) What am I doing? Examine your thoughts and behaviours at the moment. Are you worrying about overhead? Are you blaming the client? Is your heart beating faster than normal? 2) Notice your habitual way of thinking. Ask yourself, is this what I typically do when a patient no-shows — as if I’m on automatic pilot? 3) How would you like to respond during these times?<sup>3</sup>
- 4. Record your reactions to anxious or fearful patients.** Keep notes of the thoughts that enter your mind when you interact with an anxious or fearful patient. Are you critical of your patient? Critical of yourself? Record how your body feels at those times. Review your notes after a week or two. Analyze your pattern of responding.
- 5. Listen mindfully to patients and staff.** Dr. GoodSport emphasized his desire to listen better, but admits to wanting to influence peoples’ responses, which means he does not listen as effectively as he could. Pick one or two people for the day and listen without an agenda or a goal. What impact does this have on the relationship?

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Being on the receiving end of fearful patients while simultaneously running a practice and providing intricate health care takes a personal toll. How can you adequately address patients' stress and anxiety when you are not dealing with your own? *Who heals the healer?* As a dentist, you must play an integral role in tending to your own well-being — and mindfulness offers a respite, moment by moment. But it is not easy to achieve, and most people benefit from enlisting the help of a teacher or a group.

Mindfulness does not change the actual stressors in your life. Rather, it changes your relationship with those stressors. It heightens your awareness, which then makes change possible. People who regularly use mindful practices report stress reduction in as little as eight weeks. However, mindfulness needs to be regarded as a lifetime practice that infuses a calm and peace into your life. ■

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