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INFOpak

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Managing Stress

OFFICE OF STUDENT AFFAIRS

studentaffairs@ada.org
800 621.8099 x7470

Introduction

Stress and dental school often go hand in hand. The demand of exams and clinic alone is enough to cause your palms to sweat. Add in the toll your dental school commitment takes on your personal relationships—not to mention what it does to your debt level – and you’ve got a formula for some real stress concerns.

Common symptoms of stress are rapid weight gain or weight loss, fatigue, sadness, anger or depression—just to name a few. For some people, the consequence is more severe. They may attempt to cope with stress by isolating themselves, dropping out of school, abusing alcohol or other drugs, or harming one’s self or others. These are warning signs that stress may have crossed the line from a frustration to a danger. Stress responses at this elevated level are beyond the scope of this document. If you find yourself using unhealthy approaches to stress management, ask your physician for a referral to a practitioner equipped to offer professional assistance.

This Infopak will address some common dental school stressors, like fear of failure, time management, balancing relationships and more. So take a deep breath, sit down for 10 minutes and read. By doing so, you’re already taking a small step toward stress relief.

Common Dental School Stressors

Do any of these stories sound like yours?

1. Competition

“I was always at the top of my class in undergrad and high school, but now in dental school, everyone appears to be just as smart as me or smarter! I’m quickly learning of my classmates who had higher DAT scores, better GPAs, and seem to have much more disciplined study habits. How do I compete with that? How do I judge if I’m doing well? Am I excelling or am I average? And is average good enough to get through dental school and succeed in dentistry?”

Remedies to Consider

Remember How You Got Here

Don’t forget that you’re in dental school because you had the scores, skills and qualities to get you there. So take a deep breath and accept that you might not always be “the best” at everything among your classmates. Thankfully, becoming a great dentist is not about test scores or class rank, but rather a combination of clinical skills, oral health knowledge and compassion for patients.

Collaborate in the Classroom

Even though competition among classmates is evident, students are often willing to help one another. Remember, you have strengths in areas where others may have deficits so you can feel good about *giving* in addition to *taking* information. Also, don’t be afraid to approach a faculty member if you’re having problems.

Turn to the ADA for Help

If you don’t already have personal relationships with dentists, reach out to the local or state society in your dental school’s location and ask to be connected with a practicing professional. You may want to ask if that state has a Committee on the New Dentist, which consists of practicing dentists who are less than 10 years out of dental school. You might be surprised at the help that another person could provide who’s been where you are now.

If you are having difficulty finding a mentor dentist, call the ADA or your state dental society for assistance. For a complete listing of state dental societies and their contact information, visit www.ada.org/goto/constituents or call the ADA Office of Student Affairs at 800-621-8099 ext 7470.

2. Uncertainty/Fear of Failure

"I am completely lost and feel like I'm behind. At times, I feel like I have no idea what I'm doing. Will I ever learn all of this? Will I ever be able to do this correctly? Dental school is tougher than I thought, and now I'm wondering if I've chosen the right career path."

Remedies to Consider

Relax – it Takes Time to Hone Clinical Skills

Many of the skills in dentistry, especially the hand-skills, are different from any tasks you may have attempted in the past. If that wasn't enough, you are expected to perfect these skills quickly! The simplest solution to this frustration: don't compare yourself to others. Each person learns at a different pace and has his or her strengths and weaknesses in different areas. Concentrate on what you're doing and your progress alone and don't be distracted by the person next to you who may be moving quickly or seemingly knows more.

Remember Your Previous Successes

All skills take time to perfect and not everyone moves at the same pace. As an adult, you may have difficulty remembering all those complex physical tasks you have already perfected. You may rollerblade, flip an omelet, parallel park or throw a Frisbee without a second thought because you went through the learning curve long ago—now you don't exert any effort with those tasks. Take comfort from the fact that you have successfully learned new physical skills, both in and out of the dental field, in the past and that you won't always be a beginner. With patience and practice over time, you will develop the same muscle memory in dentistry.

Big Projects in Small Steps

Another way to alleviate stress is by chunking projects into smaller pieces. The novelist E.L. Doctrow once described driving a car at night. "You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way." Concentrate on what you need to do this week and next, not where you should be at the end of term. You'll get there.

Use Online Resources to Get Answers

Numerous online resources are available to support dental students. The ASDA Discussion Forum, available to ASDA/ADA members on ASDAnet.org, is a quick way to pose a question on a particular topic. Other resources not affiliated with organized dentistry, such as the forums at Student Doctor.net, offer an opportunity to connect with like-minded students who may be able to offer assistance, assurance, or just a good laugh. And don't forget to read your e-publications available from ASDA/ADA. A simple way to curb your anxiety is to by finding the answers and support you need – even if it's 2 a.m.

Turn to the ADA for Help

You may have shadowed a dentist before beginning dental school. Talking with a mentor dentist can be an effective antidote to fears about skills and your pace of progress. To find a mentor dentist, attend a local meeting or conference and introduce yourself—you'll find that most dentists are eager to meet the next generation of colleagues and, out of that group, you may find a mentor. Many state dental societies offer formal mentor programs. For contact information, visit www.ada.org/goto/constituents or call the ADA.

3. Finances/Debt

"I have \$170,000 worth of student loans stacking up, \$15,000 in credit cards, a \$12,000 balance on my car and a \$200,000 mortgage. To top things off, I can't even make ends meet now and I haven't begun to make student loan payments yet! Will dentistry help me pay down the debt I've incurred, and how long will it take? When will I get to a point where I'm comfortable with my debt and not worrying about how to pay my bills, take care of my family, live the way I want to live and not be stretched financially?"

Remedies to Consider

Take Advantage of Student Loan Options

Financing your dental education is an investment in yourself, your skills, and your earning potential over a career that may last many decades. The cost of tuition, textbooks, and day-to-day cost of living all support this investment, therefore it's reasonable to consider loans as a way to pay these expenses.

Financing a plasma television, a ski vacation, or a new wardrobe is *not* an investment in you. Using borrowed money to pay for non-essential items may seem painless in the moment, but could have a serious impact on your future cash flow. Most experts agree that you should only borrow what you need, rather than the maximum amount that a creditor is willing to lend.

In the hypothetical example at the beginning of this section, the student has \$170,000 in student loans. For the purposes of illustration, let's assume that those loans are 8 percent for 10 years. That makes the monthly payment \$2,062 (and the amount of interest and principal paid totals \$247,452).

If that same student took out an additional \$40,000--\$10,000 for each year of a four-year program, the monthly re-payment shoots up to \$2,547 (and the grand total of interest and principal rises to \$305,676).

Talk to the Experts

Some students choose to consolidate their student loans. Consolidation offers convenience, in the form of a single payment each month, rather than multiple payments with varying deadlines. Depending on interest rates, the consolidated loan may or may not have a lower interest rate than the individual component loans. For more information on new and existing student loans, check out a couple of the leading providers of student loans, Nellie Mae and Sallie Mae at www.nelliemae.com and www.salliemae.com. Also, consider consulting with a financial adviser. Some banks and credit unions offer complimentary consulting. And ask your school if they have advisers available for financial guidance.

Turn to the ADA for Help

The ADA Office of Student Affairs updates *Financial Planning Issues for Dental Students* each year. You can download a PDF copy at www.ada.org/prof/ed/students/financialplan.pdf. It covers educational debt, loan repayments, strategies and credit reporting. It also breaks down terms such as compound interest, and will show you how to estimate your total educational loan payments.

Develop a Personal Spending Plan

A spending plan isn't a recipe for drudgery, it's a roadmap that allows you to control your

finances instead of your finances controlling you. The skills that are useful in preparing a spending plan as a student become essential when planning a business for those going into private or group practice—consider this to be one more part of your dental education!

Here's how to get started:

Step One: Estimate Your Expenses:

- Bills (rent, utilities, insurance)
- Groceries and Household (detergent, cosmetics, other purchases)
- Entertainment (concert tickets, video rentals, dining out)
- Car (payments, repairs, fuel)
- Miscellaneous (try to capture all the “once-in-a-while” expenses—birthday presents, plane tickets, haircuts, etc.)

If you are like most people you have a pretty solid handle on those items in the “Bills” category and everything else is a guess. No problem!

Step Two: Track Actual Expenses:

Write down every single expense, from a credit card payment to a parking meter. To benefit from the tracking system, stick to it for a month – or even better, two or three. If you can't commit to 30 days or longer, then start with one week.

You'll use this data to refine your spending plan. Maybe you guessed that you spend \$35 a week on food when the real total is closer to \$75.

In the big picture, it's important to spend less than you earn, so a spending plan helps you stay on track. But it can also reveal if your priorities are reflected in your spending.

For instance, maybe your favorite way to unwind is to go to the movies, but you have stopped going because it seems too expensive. If your tracking shows that you spend \$25 a week grabbing breakfast on the run, consider eating breakfast at home and spending the money where you enjoy it—at the movies! Every person is different and your luxury may be your classmate's necessity.

Step Three: Stay on Track

In the end, most spending plans can accommodate a double latte', a new pair of shoes, and an evening of salsa dancing but that plan may not accommodate all of them at the same time. To make your spending plan work, you'll want to stick to it as much as possible. And when major life changes happen- and they will – step back and reevaluate your plan. You may need to make adjustments along the way. Make smart choices as a student and you'll be well-positioned to enjoy the material benefits that come with your future career in dentistry!

4. Relationship Balance/Social Life/Peer Pressure

*“My spouse says I'm neglecting him/her, my mom says I never call and Scruffy is destroying all of my furniture and shoes because I don't play with him the way I used to. Or, my friends want me to hang out more, and I'd like to get to know this certain individual a little better, but how will I ever find the time to date? And if I turn down one more invitation for **another** social event, I'll lose every friend I have.”*

Remedies to Consider

Be Upfront

Let's get real—dental school is an enormous commitment of time. Balancing school with your personal life is always difficult and, at varying times, it may be impossible—the balance will tip in favor of school and you won't be able to attend that party.

Remind yourself and loved ones that dental school is only temporary, and that you're working hard to get through it successfully so you can be a part of one of the most flexible and fulfilling professions in medicine. Most dentists in private practice report that they work just under 40 hours per week and that they have a high degree of control over their own schedules. It may be difficult to find the time for watching football, attending a barbecue, or singing karaoke while in school but trust that those activities will still be waiting when your training is complete. And if you already know that you can't make it, it's better to politely decline, instead of raising false hopes by saying, "I'll try" or "Maybe."

Make the Most of the Free Time You Have

Although school commitments will occupy most of your schedule, make the effort to spend time with others as well. Celebrate your loved ones' milestones, such as birthdays, and weddings, but also carve out smaller chunks of time for less momentous events. Splash in a puddle with a toddler, go for a walk with a friend, surprise a relative by showing up with milk and cookies. Remember, the important thing isn't always the amount of time you spend, but the quality of attention you give to others.

Be Flexible

Even though you're up to your bicuspid in wax molars and extractions, there are still ways to show your loved ones you care. Instead of giving a flat "no" to an invitation is there an alternative option? For example, if your niece's birthday party is the exact time of your clinic, then ask if you can come over a few hours before the party to say hello. Or, if you can't commit to an evening party, ask the host if she can stop by campus between classes for a cup of coffee instead. For significant others, suggest a time each week when you can hang out, even for just an hour or two, and stick to that commitment. Stay in touch in busy times with a quick e-mail or text to just say hello.

Turn to the ADA for Help

The ADA has collected a number of electronic resources for dental health and wellness, including suggestions for work-life balance at www.ada.org/goto/wellbeing.

5. Fitness and Nutrition

"All I seem to be eating lately is fast food, and I never seem to have enough time to get to the gym, or even run a couple of miles like I used to. My body is changing, and so is my energy level because I'm not exercising, not eating right and not giving my body the attention it deserves."

Remedies to Consider

Get Started!

When it comes to fitness and nutrition, you probably already know what you *should* do; the real challenge is doing the right thing on a consistent basis while meeting all your other commitments.

Whatever approaches you used before may have fallen to the wayside as you have faced

the new challenges of dental school. This is no time for guilt or remorse, this is time for creative strategies—here's some to get you started!

Build Time to Exercise into your Routine:

- For cardio conditioning, you may have difficulty finding the time to swim laps or go for a jog. You may get more of a “bang for your buck” with higher intensity activities done for a shorter time, such as spinning or jumping rope.
- Wear a pedometer and aim for a minimum of 10,000 steps each day. Having the target number may motivate you to take the steps instead of an elevator or to park farther from your destination.
- If you enjoy yoga or Pilates but have difficulty attending a regular class, try using an instructional video. You'll find free video podcasts for all sorts of fitness classes online—experiment!
- For strength training without weights, try body weight exercises, such as push-ups. Search for “body weight workout” online for suggestions of exercises you can do in your living room
- One popular, if peculiar, strength-training regimen is the shovelglove workout. The plan uses a sledgehammer to mimic the motions of hard, physical labor—shoveling coal, churning butter, chopping wood, etc. You can find videos and explanations at www.shovelglove.com

Plan Ahead to Eat Healthy:

- Experts recommend five servings of produce a day. Keeping prepped vegetables in the fridge—baby carrots, broccoli florets, cleaned leafy greens, and the like—makes it easier to hit that target number of servings.
- Canning destroys many vitamins but frozen foods are competitive with fresh produce when it comes to nutritional content. Add mixed veggies to your spaghetti sauce, whirl frozen strawberries in a blender for a hot weather treat, and pop edema me from their shells for a low fat, high protein snack.
- Pre-plan your proteins! You might have the energy on weeknights to make a salad but not to cook a chicken breast. Keep a variety of low-maintenance proteins on-hand—slices of low-fat turkey, packages of seasoned tofu, frozen fish fillets and rotisserie chickens are all good choices.
- Generally speaking, the less processed a food is, the better it is for you. Whole grains are healthier than white flours, brown rice is healthier than white rice, a baked potato is healthier than a potato chip, and so on. Unprocessed foods have more fiber, slowing the release of carbohydrates into your bloodstream, giving you energy over a sustained period.
- If you don't already enjoy cooking, dental school is probably not the easiest time to learn. If the kitchen is not your comfort zone, keep a variety of healthy components on-hand to mix and match. A handful of baby carrots dipped in hummus, a piece of wholegrain toast spread with peanut butter and a piece of leftover salmon might not be what your grandparents would have called a meal, but it's balanced and both faster and cheaper than ordering a pizza!

6. Neglecting Everyday Responsibilities

“I forgot to pay my cell phone bill, I never made it to the cleaners, my house is a mess, and I haven't changed my linen in two months! I still need to take my car in for an oil change, return the DVD's to the video store, help my little sister with applications to dental school and return phone calls from over a week ago. How can I catch up and keep up?”

Remedies to Consider

Make it easier on yourself—Create a System

Is your “to-do” list a mile long? We all have the same 24 hours each day; the trick is in managing that time for maximum efficiency. Here are some suggestions to consider:

- Your brain is wonderful at managing complex information—don’t waste the mental bandwidth necessary to memorize your schedule, your checking account balance or your shopping list. Whether you use a paper calendar or the latest electronics, use a system to capture your responsibilities and remind you of due-dates.
- Automate wherever possible! Use online bill-payment software to make sure your bills are never overdue. Online DVD rental companies can send you movies to your mailbox and return them, postage paid.
- Pretend that you are making a to-do list for a stranger and you must provide complete information. Instead of writing “Schedule oil change,” write, “Schedule oil change 312-555-1212” When you find yourself with a spare moment, you can knock these easy items off your list because you have the complete information at your fingertips
- Never go home for the evening if your car has an empty gas tank. Fill up in the evening to avoid adding an additional early-morning obligation to your list.
- Choose one spot in your house to serve as a “landing strip” for your keys, wallet, cell phone, and other items you take with you every day. Eliminate the early morning scavenger hunt!
- Respect your energy. Not a morning person? Pack a lunch, pick your wardrobe, put everything you’ll need into your bag, fill the coffee maker and review the next day’s To Do list before bed.
- Cluster similar tasks together. Return a batch of phone calls, respond to a series of emails, research on the internet, etc.
- Set a timer. Sometimes an artificial deadline is just the trick to kick productivity up to the next level. Five minutes to finish a paragraph? Eight minutes to put away the clean dishes? Timers are also great procrastination-busters. Tell yourself you’ll only work for fifteen minutes and the timer goes off—often this is enough time to allow yourself to become absorbed in the task and momentum to take over.
- Collaborate with friends and roommates. One person can pick up everyone’s dry cleaning while another can return everyone’s material to the library. Don’t forget about cooking jumbo-sized meals together for the pleasure of shared meals (and the convenience of shared leftovers!)

Many people benefit from a highly structured time management system. Two popular books on the subject are *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey and *Getting Things Done* by David Allen.

7. Exhaustion

“I haven’t slept for more than four hours straight in a month. I constantly nod off in class, and I have to drink excessive amounts of coffee to somehow manage to study at night. When I do get some free time, all I can think about is catching up on my sleep.”

Remedies to Consider

Make Lifestyle Changes to Improve Sleep

Sleep isn’t an option. While most students can survive an occasional late night of studying, your long-term strategy should include enough rest. Here’s some tips:

- Have breakfast, even if you don't feel hungry. You'll be more energized later in the day when you eat in the morning.
- Stay hydrated
- Limit your caffeine intake after noon—too much caffeine can impact your quality of sleep, leading to a vicious cycle
- Splash cold water on your face and wrists (55% of survey participants said this made them feel more energized according to a study published in *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*)
- Cut down on computer and TV time at night. The light from those screens suppresses the production of melatonin, a hormone that tells the brain it's nighttime. Scientists at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School in Dallas recommend turning off the screens at least two hours before bed.
- Alcohol might help you to fall asleep but as your body metabolizes the alcohol, the sedative effects wear off, causing you to wake up and have difficulty returning to sleep.
- If you haven't fallen asleep within 15 minutes, get out of bed and do something relaxing until you feel sleepy enough to try again. Lying in bed while worrying about *not* sleeping only increases anxiety and reduces the likelihood of a restful night's sleep.

If you are choosing between staying up an hour longer to study or to hit the sack, the best decision is usually sleep. According to a study published in *Science Daily* in July 2006, "sleep improves the brain's ability to remember information." Instead of cramming in one night, study in small spurts and review your notes before you fall asleep. The day before a big exam, take time to exercise, eat right and get enough sleep. You'll be glad you did.

If you think you're getting enough sleep but still feel tired, consult a physician. This kind of fatigue can be a symptom of an underlying health problem. Visit www.Maycolinic.com/health/fatigue/HQ00673.

In Conclusion

Stress is like bad weather—it can't be prevented but its effects can be mitigated. With that, we'll leave you with a summary of tips to relieve stress.

Dental School Stress:

- Believe in yourself and your abilities
- Collaborate with students and faculty
- Ask for help and support from new dentists
- Break large projects into manageable pieces

Finances:

- Remember that dental school is an investment
- Research student loan options
- Track expenses and create a spending plan

Work/Life Balance

- Plan ahead to maximize free time
- Communicate expectations with friends and family
- Be creative – exercise with friends, cook dinner with your spouse, call Mom during a class break
- Spend at least 15 minutes a day doing something fun

Health

- Take a deep breath inflating not only your lungs but also your belly
- Move: Go for a walk around the block, ride your bike to class, do push ups once a day
- Snack healthy: grapes, almonds, baby carrots are all examples of healthy on-the-go foods
- If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation
- Make sleep a priority
- Consult your physician if you have chronic fatigue symptoms

Day to Day Life:

- Automate when possible
- Make your "to do" list specific and detailed to save time later
- Ask for help when you need it

Lastly, remember that you are not alone. These stressors affect many students just like you. By putting in the time and effort now, you will have great payoff later in life.