



Mental Health Resources for Dental Students

JOURNALING & DISCUSSION EXERCISES



A collection of journaling and discussion prompts to help recognize the difference between fake positivity and authentic self-care

Contents

Introduction to Fake Positivity and Authentic Self-care	2
Self-reflection Journaling Exercises	3
Recognizing Fake Positivity.....	3
Exploring Authentic Self-care.....	4
Reflecting on the Difference	5
Group Discussion Activity: Real Talk – Positivity or Pressure?	8
Setting up the activity	9
Materials	9
Ground rules	9
Structure.....	10



Introduction to Fake Positivity and Authentic Self-care

Some people are naturally more optimistic than others, and having a genuine positive outlook when times are challenging can be beneficial for some people. However, sometimes having a positive outlook in a particularly sad or distressing period, especially when it is forced, can cause further issues.

This resource provides a series of recommended exercises, including self-reflection and group discussion, to help you recognize fake positivity and identify mechanisms that support your self-care. As you work through these prompts, we encourage you to write down your thoughts and feelings so that you can reflect on them again in the future.

Before you begin, let's lay out the key definitions:

Fake positivity:

Feigning or forcing a positive attitude, especially in situations where difficult emotions or negative situations are present and should be acknowledged. This can be detrimental due to the prevention of emotional processing.

Authentic self-care:

Looking after yourself through behaviours that align with your personal preferences and values. This is a deliberate, sustainable way of protecting your well-being, including recognizing problems and taking steps to protect your mental health.

Self-reflection Journaling Exercises

Complete these exercises at your own pace, in your own way. You may find you can relate to some questions more than others; this is perfectly normal and may help you to identify areas of strength and potential improvement in how you manage your mental health.



Recognizing Fake Positivity

Consider the following questions. Type out your thoughts in the boxes below, or sit back and think about each question.

When do I feel pressured to say “*I’m fine*” when I’m not?

Have I ever been told to “*just be positive*” when what I really needed was support or space?

Do I ever post or present a version of myself that hides how I’m truly doing? Why?

What phrases or behaviours do I use to mask how overwhelmed I actually feel?
(e.g., “It’s fine!” “Can’t complain!” “I’ll just push through”)

How do I respond when others are struggling? Do I sit with them in it, or try to fix it too quickly?

Exploring Authentic Self-care

Consider the following questions. Type out your thoughts in the boxes below, or sit back and think about each question.

What does real self-care look like for me? Not what’s trendy or performative.

What’s one thing I do regularly that genuinely helps me feel grounded or safe?

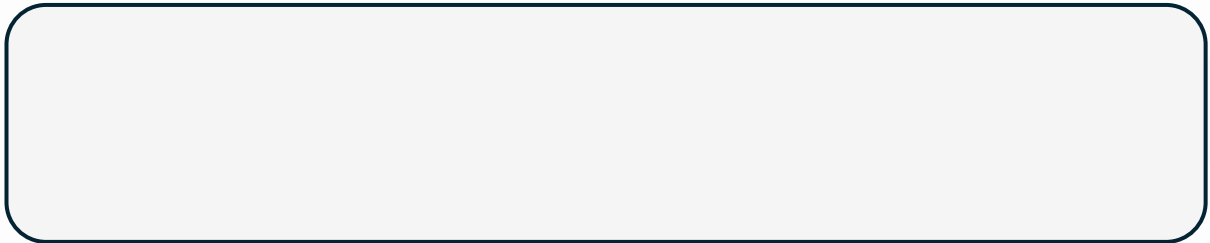
How do I know when I need rest, versus when I'm avoiding something important?



What are my warning signs that I'm burning out or running on empty?



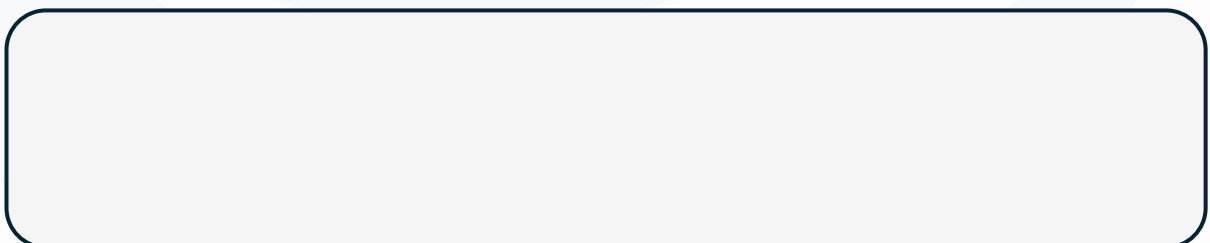
How can I set boundaries with kindness, both to myself and to others?



Reflecting on the Difference

Consider the following questions. Type out your thoughts in the boxes below, or sit back and think about each question.

When does 'positivity' feel forced or toxic to me?



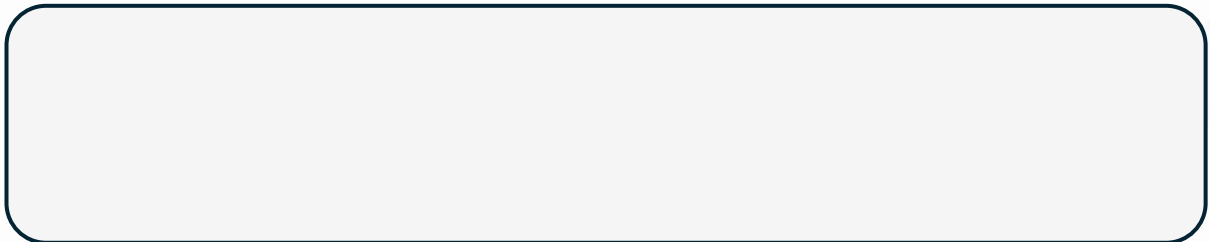
Have I ever made myself feel guilty for needing time off or not being 'productive'?



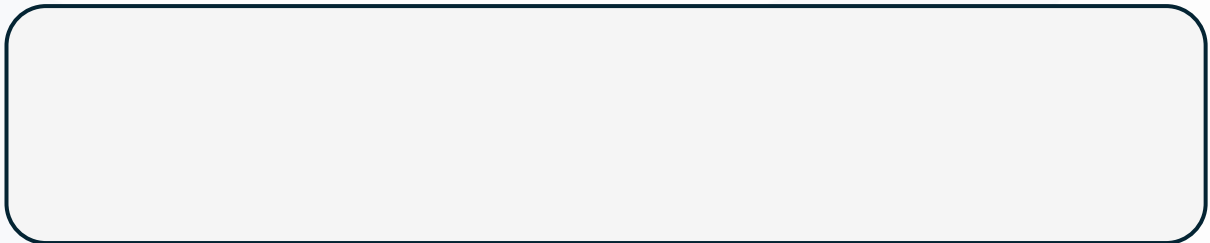
Can I name a time when I chose honesty over cheerfulness, and it helped?



What's one way I can support my peers with honesty, rather than empty reassurance?

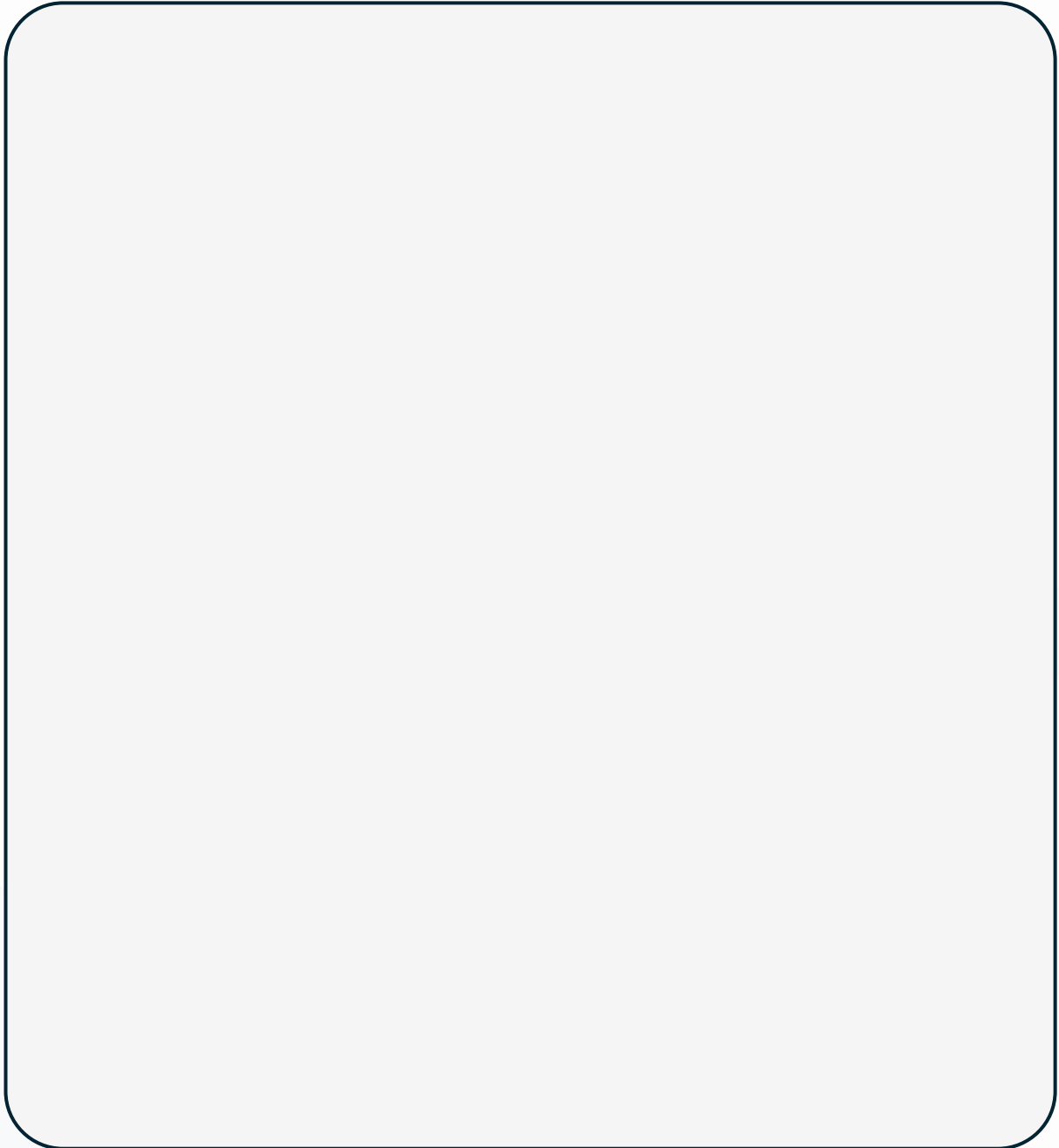


What's something I can let go of this week, a 'should' that's not helping me?



Finally, consider:

What does showing up for yourself actually mean in dental school, and how can we create a culture where being honest is seen as a strength, not a weakness?





Group Discussion Activity: Real Talk – Positivity or Pressure?

This activity provides a recommended structure for group discussion relating to the themes we have focused on so far – *fake positivity* and *authentic self-care*. You may choose to complete the self-reflection activities above before this session, but this is not essential; even if you have never heard of the terms above, the activity is set up such that you will still be able to actively engage in the topic and discussion.



Purpose

To help students distinguish between fake positivity and authentic self-care, and explore how to create a culture of honesty and support in dental school



Time required

30–45 minutes



Group size

4–6 students

Setting up the activity

This activity is designed to be easy to implement, with minimal preparation required.

Materials

- For your own notes, you can use:
 - This editable PDF document
 - A printed handout (print pages 10-11 of this document)
- If you would like to make notes as a group, you can use:
 - A shared online document
 - A whiteboard (regular or digital)
 - Sticky notes



**Sustainability
in Dentistry**

FDI is passionate about [Sustainability in Dentistry](#), on which we provide a series of online courses and resources.

We kindly request the use of digital notes or the recycling of any physical materials used.

Ground rules

This activity is about **creating a safe space**. Before the session begins, the following ground rules should be made clear:



Rule 1

There are **no right or wrong answers**.



Rule 2

Listening is as important as sharing.



Rule 3

Vulnerability is welcome, but **no one should feel pressured** to overshare.

Structure

1. Warm-Up (5 mins)

Share one phrase you often hear in dental school that sounds positive but might be unhelpful.

If you would like to note your answer before going around the group, feel free to use the space below:

Examples:

- "You'll be fine, everyone feels like that."
- "Smile through it!"
- "At least you're not in med school!"

2. Small Group Discussion (20–25 mins)

Choose 2–3 prompts on *fake positivity* and *authentic self-care* to explore as a group; feel free to use the prompts discussed earlier, any of the examples below, or your own relevant prompts. Discuss your thoughts and feelings, and remember to actively listen to everyone in the group.

Example prompts:

Fake Positivity

- When have you felt pressured to 'stay positive' at the expense of honesty?
- Has someone ever responded to your struggle with empty reassurance? How did that feel?
- What's the difference between encouragement and dismissal?

Authentic Self-Care

- What does real self-care look like for you? Not what social media says.
- How do you personally recognize when you're approaching burnout?
- How do you respond when a friend or peer says they're struggling?

3. Whole Group Discussion (10 mins)

Invite each group to share one insight or idea they found valuable during their discussion.

If you would like to note your answer before going around the group, feel free to use the space below:

4. Silent Reflection or Journaling (Optional, 5 mins)

Write down or reflect on the following prompt.

What's one kind thing I could offer myself this week that's real, not performative?

If you would like to note down your answer, feel free to use the space below:



FDI World Dental Federation

Chemin de Joinville 26 • 1216 Geneva • Switzerland
T +41 22 560 81 50 • info@fdiworlddental.org

fdiworlddental.org

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