



## Mental Health Resources for Dental Students

### **MENTAL HEALTH TOOLKIT FOR DENTAL STUDENTS**



A toolkit to support dental students in recognizing  
common mental health challenges

## Contents

Introduction to Mental Health and Well-being in Dentistry .....	2
Mental Health Challenges in Dentistry .....	3
Recognizing stress .....	4
Recognizing burnout.....	9
Recognizing imposter syndrome .....	11
Recognizing hierarchical pressures .....	13
Recognizing cultural isolation.....	15
Recognizing a lack of peer connection.....	17
Additional resources .....	19
References .....	19



## **Introduction to Mental Health and Well-being in Dentistry**

Dental students face constant stressors, including high workloads, stressful exam periods, and long working and study hours. This can leave students feeling strained with anxiety, worry, and stress and can result in further serious mental health issues such as addictive behaviours and burnout. Extensive periods of stress can even impact physical health, with associated problems including lowered immune response and muscular aches and pains.

As part of the Mental Health and Well-being in Dentistry project, FDI have developed this Mental Health Toolkit for Dental Students, which aims to support dental students in recognizing common mental health challenges and taking their first steps towards addressing them. Learning how to recognize mental health challenges early can lay a foundation for managing the different challenges that arise in dental practice. The toolkit ends with links to FDI's collection of student mental health resources, which provide further help in addressing these challenges.

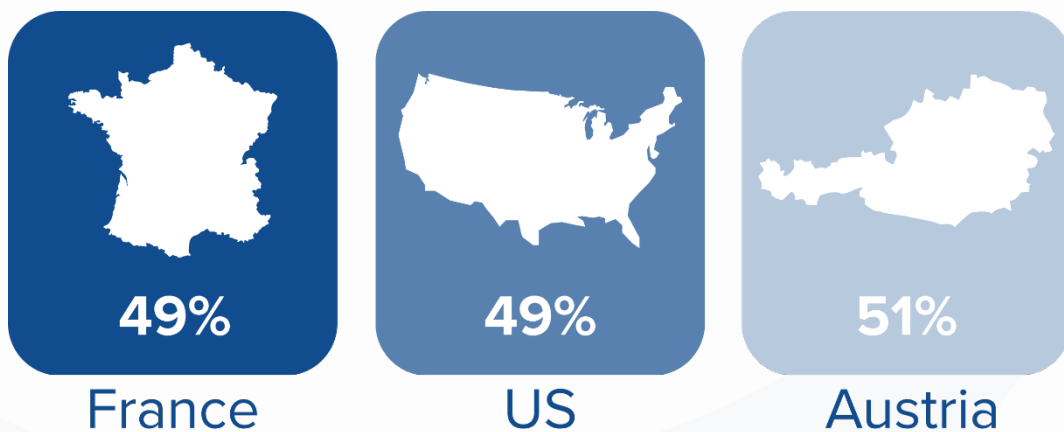
# Mental Health Challenges in Dentistry

*"Mental health of the dentist is not only beneficial to the dentist; it is also important for the patient. Quality of treatment, care, and follow-up, as well as maintenance of rapport, can all be affected."*

*FDI Student Focus Group quote*

As mentioned previously, dental students face a wide array of stressors during their studies; however, mental health continues to be a challenge as students progress into their professional lives. For example, studies have shown that up to 87% of dental practitioners suffer symptoms of burnout in the United Kingdom, and according to a study published in 2020, 32% of physicians and dentists working mainly in middle-income countries experienced professional burnout.<sup>1,2</sup>

In high-income countries, the percentage of physicians reporting symptoms of burnout is estimated to be:<sup>3-5</sup>



Common mental health challenges dental students may face include:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Stress</li><li>• Burnout</li><li>• Imposter syndrome</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hierarchical pressure</li><li>• Cultural isolation</li><li>• Lack of peer connection</li></ul> |
|--|--|

In the following pages, we will discuss how you can recognize and begin to alleviate these pressures.

## Recognizing stress

Stress results from an imbalance between our perceptions of the demands placed upon us (physical, psychological, time, and emotional) and our ability to meet those demands. But before we can start to alleviate our stress, we must first identify its cause.

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*"I think that well-being and mental health is about being able to live a stress-free life while being able to fulfil your basic human rights, the pursuit of happiness and equality."*

*FDI Student Focus Group quote*

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## Assessing the stress in your life

It is easy to become overwhelmed by the stress we face in our day-to-day lives, especially when there are multiple sources of stress. One strategy to help alleviate stress is to tackle each source one at a time, beginning with the source you think is easiest to change. It may not be the most important source of stress you are facing, but tackling it can ease some burdens and give you a sense of control and success.

## What are the sources of stress in your dental school?

1. Thinking about your dental school, what are the things that cause you stress? List as many as you can.

Using your list of stress sources, rank them in order of importance and consider how easy each of these would be to change.

My top 5 sources of stress at dental school		
Importance ranking	Stress source	Ease of change 1 = very easy 5 = very hard
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		

### How is this stress affecting you?

Now that you have thought about *what* the main stressors are affecting you in your dental school, the next step is to consider *how* this stress is affecting you. This includes thinking about the physiological manifestation of stress, how it affects the way you think, and the way you act.

For each of the signs and symptoms listed below, think about how often you experience them in a weekly period.



## Physiological manifestations

Stress can cause a wide variety of signs and symptoms, including:

- “Butterflies” in the stomach
- Feeling that your pulse is racing
- Feeling that your heart is pounding
- Feeling that you are having difficulty breathing
- Excessively sweaty hands
- Feelings of muscle tension



The way you...

## Think

Thinking about the last month, have you noticed any changes in the way you think? This could include:

- Having difficulty concentrating
- Forgetting things, particularly little details
- Worrying about mistakes that you have made
- Worrying about what your peers think of you
- Having difficulty making decisions
- Losing confidence in yourself
- Thinking of yourself as worthless
- Feeling unhappy and depressed
- Going over and over in your mind things that happened in classes

If you find that you are experiencing these symptoms very frequently, you should consider tackling these physiological signs of stress and negative thoughts, as well as addressing ways to make your environment less stressful.

The way you...

## Act



Thinking about the last month, have you noticed any changes in your behaviour?

This could include:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Smoking more</li><li>• Drinking more alcohol</li><li>• Changing diet (e.g., eating more, eating less)</li><li>• Seeing less of friends</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Taking sick leave from study</li><li>• Having more arguments with peers/friends</li><li>• Working/studying late more often</li><li>• Missing more lunch breaks</li></ul> |
|--|--|

If you notice changes in these behaviours, stress may be having a significant impact on your life and tackling these issues should be considered a priority.



## Your health

Thinking about the last month, have you noticed any changes in your health? This can include:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Feelings of tiredness and headaches</li><li>• Increased number of headaches and migraines</li><li>• Increased number of colds</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Indigestion</li><li>• Feelings of low self-esteem</li><li>• Feeling anxious</li><li>• Feeling depressed</li></ul> |
|---|---|

All of these changes should be taken seriously, and if you are experiencing them, you should consult your doctor and try to alleviate the stress in your life.



## What you can do

Refer back to your table of stress sources and notice which ones feel easiest to change.



**Start small** – pick one manageable stressor to focus on; small wins build confidence and momentum



**Take one step** – decide on one simple action you can take this week to reduce or manage that stress



**Reflect and adjust** – notice how that change affects your stress levels and if it helps, keep building on it



**Work your way up** – once you've tackled the easier stressors, move toward the ones that feel more challenging or important

Remember, it's about progress, not perfection. Managing stress is a gradual process, and every positive step counts.

## Recognizing burnout

Burnout is an extreme form of long-term stress that can result in a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion. Some people may also develop a lack of empathy (detachment/cynicism) and feelings of reduced personal achievement.

As discussed previously, burnout is incredibly common amongst dentists, even across different environments. As you begin your professional journey, it is therefore vital to recognize the signs of burnout because it can affect your well-being, your relationships, and the care you provide.

### Key signs of burnout include:



#### **Emotional Exhaustion**

- Feeling drained, overwhelmed, or unable to cope
- Losing empathy for other students, patients, or colleagues
- Struggling to 'switch off' after work



#### **Detachment or Cynicism**

- Becoming irritable, impatient, or numb
- Avoiding other students, patients, colleagues, or responsibilities
- Feeling detached from the purpose of your work



#### **Reduced Sense of Accomplishment**

- Doubting your competence, even when you're doing well
- Feeling that your work doesn't matter or isn't making a difference
- Losing confidence in your clinical decision-making

Physical symptoms, like headaches, sleep disturbances, and frequent illness, can also accompany burnout. Further emotional and behavioural signs can include anxiety, difficulty concentrating, withdrawing from society, or a sense of hopelessness.

## Why it matters

Ignoring burnout can lead to long-term mental health issues, reduced quality of care, and even decisions to leave the profession. Recognizing it early is the first step toward protecting your health and career.

## What you can do



**Talk to someone** – a trusted friend, classmate, colleague, mentor, or mental health professional



**Set boundaries** – learn to say no, take breaks, and protect time for rest and non-dental activities



**Reflect regularly** – journalling or supervision can help process emotions and spot early warning signs

## Burnout resources

Burnout is not a weakness but a signal that something needs to change. And change is possible. Explore the resources below to learn more.

- <https://mentalhealth-uk.org/burnout/>
- <https://adanews.ada.org/ada-news/2024/april/feeling-burned-out-you-re-not-alone/>

## Recognizing Imposter Syndrome

Imposter syndrome is the persistent feeling that you're not as competent or capable as others think you are, and that it's only a matter of time before you're "found out." It's surprisingly common among high-achieving students and early-career professionals, especially in healthcare.

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*"Dental students can feel like they have to prove their performance, both short- and long-term. I've seen my peers suffering from mental health issues because of this."*

*FDI Student Focus Group quote*

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## Key signs of imposter syndrome



### **Self-Doubt Despite Success**

- You dismiss praise or achievements as luck or timing
- You feel like your success isn't deserved



### **Perfectionism**

- You set unrealistically high standards for yourself
- Anything less than perfect feels like failure



### **Fear of Being "Exposed"**

- You worry people will think you're not as smart or skilled as they thought
- You avoid new challenges in case you "fail"



### **Overworking**

- You work excessively to compensate for your perceived inadequacy
- You struggle to delegate because you fear it might reveal your limitations

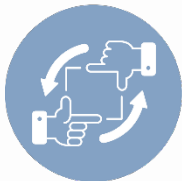
## Why it matters

Left unchecked, imposter syndrome can lead to anxiety, burnout, and reduced confidence in clinical settings. It may stop you from asking for help, applying for opportunities, or recognizing your growth.

## What you can do



**Normalize it** – many students and professionals feel this way at some point; you're not alone



**Reframe your thoughts** – recognize that learning is part of your career journey and that you've just started out; it isn't a sign of failure



**Track evidence** – keep a log of positive feedback, successes, and compliments to reflect on when self-doubt creeps in



**Talk to someone** – mentors, peers, or supervisors can offer reassurance and perspective, and building a support network with others can create a sense of community and shared experience

## Imposter syndrome resources

Imposter syndrome can affect anyone, regardless of their experience, background, or accomplishments. Explore the resource below for further advice on building confidence.

- <https://adanews.ada.org/new-dentist/2024/november/qa-building-confidence-in-the-face-of-imposter-syndrome/>

## Recognizing hierarchy

As you transition into clinical practice, you'll enter a system where hierarchy is often deeply embedded between students and tutors, junior and senior staff, dental care professionals and dentists, and even between specialities. While some structure is necessary for safety and supervision, hierarchical pressure can become harmful when it silences your voice or undermines your confidence.

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*"It is true that hierarchy is necessary for organization and for the system to work, but it can work unreasonably, for example, when people use their position to intimidate those below, it can drain all your energy and willpower. I think that happens to every dental student at one time or another"*

*FDI Student Focus Group quote*

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## Key signs of unhealthy hierarchical pressure



### Reluctance to Speak Up

- You hesitate to ask questions or challenge decisions, even when you have concerns
- You fear being labelled "difficult" or "not a team player"



### Deference Over Judgement

- You automatically assume the most senior person is always right
- You override your clinical instincts or moral discomfort to avoid conflict



### Unequal Learning Opportunities

- Certain students or staff receive more attention, feedback, or complex tasks, often because of status, gender, or background
- You feel overlooked or invisible in group settings



## Microaggressions or Dismissive Behaviour

- Your input is ignored or minimized in favour of more “senior” voices
- You’re told to “know your place” or “earn your stripes” before contributing

### Why it matters

Unchecked hierarchy can impact patient safety, learning, and mental health. It creates environments where errors go unanother” and learning is stifled by fear. It also reinforces inequality, making it harder for women, minorities, and junior staff to thrive.

### What you can do



**Name it** – recognize that hierarchy exists, but it doesn't always equal wisdom or correctness



**Seek mentors** – find people who empower you to think, speak, and grow, not just obey



**Practice respectful challenge** – learn how to question or suggest alternatives using assertive, non-confrontational language



**Support your peers** – speak up when you see others being excluded or diminished

## Recognizing cultural isolation

Cultural isolation occurs when you feel disconnected or excluded due to your background, identity, or lived experience. In a new clinic, region, or country, it's not uncommon for students or early-career professionals to feel like outsiders, especially when few others share their culture, language, faith, gender expression, or values.

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*You deserve to feel seen, valued, and safe — not just in your personal life, but in your professional one too."*

*FDI Student Focus Group quote*

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## Key signs of cultural isolation



### **Sense of Otherness**

- You feel like you have to code-switch (change how you speak or act) to fit in
- You notice your culture, accent, appearance, or beliefs being seen as “different”



### **Lack of Social Connection**

- You feel excluded from informal chats, social groups, or decision-making
- You're often not invited to after-work activities or struggle to join conversations



### **Emotional Fatigue**

- You feel drained from having to constantly explain, justify, or downplay parts of your identity
- You experience self-doubt or loneliness, even in busy team settings



### **Microaggressions or Stereotyping**

- You hear subtle or overt comments that make assumptions about your culture, abilities, or values
- You're mistaken for support staff or treated with less respect than your peers



## Why it matters

Cultural isolation can erode your confidence, well-being, and sense of professional identity. Over time, it can lead to burnout, withdrawal, or leaving the profession entirely. This is particularly true for minoritized or international graduates.

## What you can do



**Acknowledge it** – cultural isolation is real and you're not imagining it



**Find community** – seek out affinity groups, mentors, or networks who share or value your background



**Practice self-compassion** – you don't need to change who you are to belong



**Raise awareness** – if you feel safe, speak up or advocate for inclusivity in your team

## Recognizing a lack of peer connection

Peer support is a powerful buffer against stress, doubt, and burnout, especially in the early years of clinical practice. But in some environments, students and young professionals find themselves feeling unsupported, excluded, or in quiet competition with those around them.

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*“At the moment, students are working against each other, not with each other.”*

*FDI Student Focus Group quote*

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## Key signs of a lack of peer support



### Feeling Isolated

- You don't feel comfortable confiding in your peers about challenges or mistakes
- You go through difficult days alone, without anyone checking in



### No Shared Learning or Debriefing

- You don't have peers to discuss clinical decisions, patient experiences, or uncertainties with
- Conversations feel superficial or transactional, rather than mutually supportive



### Toxic Competition

- You feel like you're constantly being compared or judged rather than encouraged
- Success feels like a zero-sum game, meaning that if someone else wins, you lose



### Lack of Emotional Safety

- You worry about being seen as weak if you admit stress, fatigue, or self-doubt
- You've been met with dismissal, minimization, or gossip when you've opened up before

## Why it matters

Dentistry is a team sport, and going without peer support can lead to:

**Burnout and poor mental health**

**Reduced clinical confidence**

**Feeling disengaged from the profession**

Without peer support, it's also harder to learn from experience, both your own and others'.

## What you can do



**Be the first to reach out** – create small moments of kindness and vulnerability with others



**Find your people** – join study groups, professional associations, or online networks where you feel safe and seen



**Ask for structured support** – request peer reflection sessions or informal debriefs in your practice setting



**Know it's not just you** – many students and early-career dentists feel the same, and it doesn't mean you're not cut out for this

## Peer support resources

FDI also offers resources to help you establish peer support systems in your dental school, including a comprehensive peer support guide and templates to support you in running your own sessions.

## Additional resources

Advice on **Finding Mental Health Support in Dentistry** can be found in a succinct document within the FDI e-Learning course **Managing Mental Health from Dental School to Dental Practice** (*available on the front page*).

<https://elearning.easygenerator.com/1c299815-1ef7-40da-9166-deeb373c1d35/>

The links below are provided as further resources and include video advice on relaxation, e-learning courses on psychological safety, the FDI Dental Check-up Podcast Mental Health series, and tips and tricks to reduce stress in your working environment.

- <https://fdimentalhealthtoolkit.org/additional-resources/>
- <https://fdimentalhealthtoolkit.org/individual-level/do/>
- <https://learninghub.nhs.uk/catalogue/safe-learning-environment-charter?nodeId=6262>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/tips-and-support/mindfulness/>

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