

# The Well-being Toolkit for Dental Professionals

**A Unilever mini-series on how to flourish, thrive and avoid burnout in dentistry**

In collaboration with Dr Mahrukh Khwaja,  
Dentist and Positive Psychologist

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Occupational stress is a common issue amongst dental professionals.<sup>1,2</sup> Unfortunately, sources of stress are diverse and ingrained in the job. They include working under strict time constraints, high workload, targets set by governing health bodies, dealing with anxious patients, threat of litigation and even the physical demands associated with clinical practice.<sup>3,4,5</sup> When experienced in small amounts, stress can have a positive impact on motivation and productivity.<sup>5</sup> However, chronic work-related stress is a key driver of poor mental health, anxiety, depression and burnout.<sup>5,6,7</sup>



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# What is burnout?

Burnout is defined as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment.<sup>8</sup> It can have serious consequences and is a major concern of global organisations, including the World Health Organization, Dental Protection and the World Dental Federation.<sup>9,10,11</sup> Burnout was first described in the 1970s and first recorded in dental professionals in the 1980s.<sup>12</sup>

1

## EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION

- Feeling tired or drained most of the time
- Feeling helpless, trapped and/or defeated
- Feeling overwhelmed

2

## DEPERSONALISATION

- Having a cynical/negative outlook
- Impersonal or cold in interactions with others
- Loss of compassion

3

## REDUCED PERSONAL ACCOMPLISHMENT

- Self-doubt
- Procrastinating and taking longer to get things done



## How does burnout impact the dental profession?

Burnout causes poor well-being for dental professionals and can contribute to them leaving the profession through early retirement or a career change.<sup>13</sup> Emotional exhaustion experienced by burned-out dental professionals may be responsible for irreversible clinical errors in up to 28% of individuals. These are due to either technical errors during procedures or lack of concentration.<sup>11</sup> The fear and anxiety that comes with making such errors can result in dental professionals modifying their practice by abandoning, delaying, deferring or avoiding the provision of treatments – or practising ‘defensive dentistry’.<sup>13</sup> As a result, working in fear of making an error and being sued is alarmingly common. Up to 9 in 10 dentists are in fear of being sued by their patients, over half make more referrals as a result and 74% feel like their fear led them to modify the services they believed they could offer.<sup>14</sup>

There are also significant negative impacts on patients, with the knock-on effects of burnout compromising dentists’ performance, reducing quality of care and increasing the risk of clinical errors.<sup>13</sup>

With between 8-36% of dentists experiencing burnout and a further 18.5% at risk of burnout, as well as the compounding effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on practitioners,<sup>15</sup> the situation is serious. Therefore, it’s essential for industry organisations and the companies that operate in oral health to provide, and for dental professionals to know, the tools and techniques available so they can help themselves.



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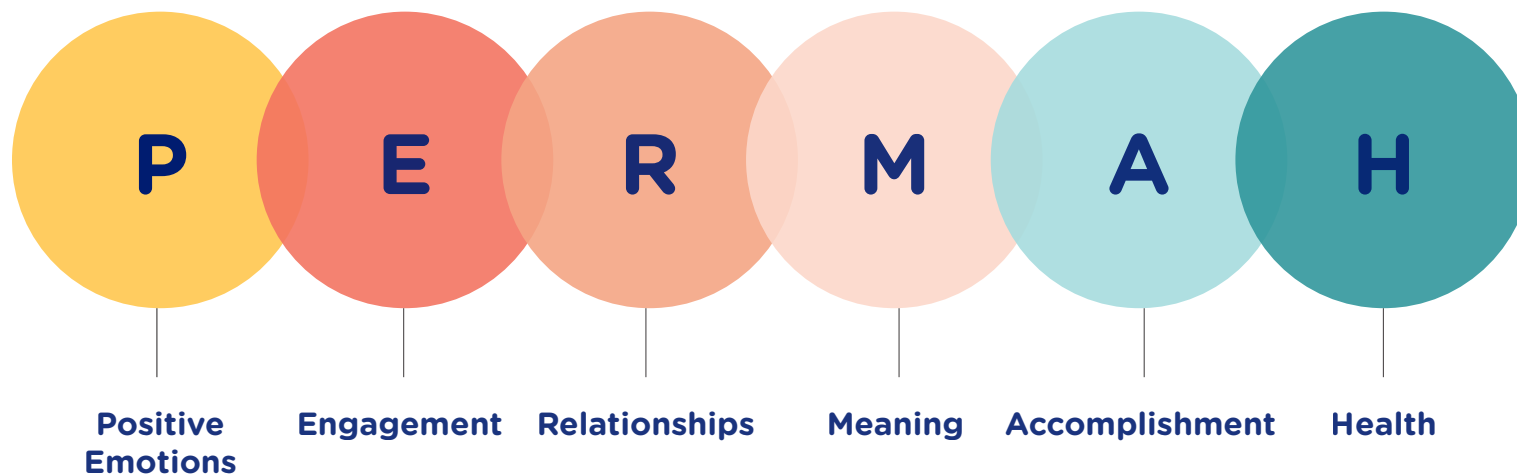
**DR MAHRUKH KHWAJA,  
DENTIST AND POSITIVE  
PSYCHOLOGIST**

The prevalence of burnout amongst dental professionals may sound disconcerting, but fortunately there are evidence-based tools that can be utilised to help dental professionals not only cope with stressors, but to move beyond baseline to optimal states, such as flourishing. Chief among these strategies is the PERMA-H model, originally created as 'PERMA' by Professor Martin Seligman and later developed to PERMA-H by Man Lai and colleagues.<sup>16,17</sup> PERMA-H champions six components of well-being to help you feel happier, energised at work, connected to others, have a sense of purpose and accomplish goals that align with what matters to you the most. The Well-being Toolkit for Dental Professionals can be thought of as a self-intervention: your guide to help you integrate the different ingredients of well-being, and increase positive feelings, positive thoughts and positive actions in the process.

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PERMA-H has been dubbed the ‘scientific theory of happiness’ and is currently used with success in the military, a wide range of organisations and schools.

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# A toolkit built on the principles of PERMA-H

Using Professor Seligman's PERMA-H model and in collaboration with Dr Khwaja, this series of articles and worksheets aims to help dental professionals avoid burnout by focusing on these six pillars with a view to building resilience.

Stress management strategies adopting elements of these pillars have been shown in clinical trials to significantly reduce stress levels. Implementing them in daily life and clinical practice may help to manage the stressful aspects of dentistry, avoid burnout and increase general happiness and well-being.<sup>18</sup>

## Further resources

**This meditation, from Dr Khwaja, helps you explore your energy and emotion levels, spotlighting burnout in order for you to take positive steps forward.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpLwtPKyh2w&t=3s>

**Read part 1 of this content series about positive emotions here:**

[link](#)



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## About Dr Mahrukh Khwaja



Dr Mahrukh Khwaja is a dentist, positive psychologist, accredited mindfulness teacher and the founder of Mind Ninja, a first-of-its-kind wellness start-up dedicated to improving mental health and resilience among dental professionals.

With over 12 years of clinical experience “at the chair-side,” Dr Khwaja has an insider’s perspective on the unique stressors affecting dental professionals. She also has first-hand knowledge of the lack of industry-specific mental health tools and support — something she discovered during her own bout with burnout. With nothing of its kind currently available in the dental industry, she envisioned a system of support that, just like daily flossing and brushing, took a preventive maintenance approach to mental health. Drawing on the neuroscience of well-being and positive psychology, she developed Mind Ninja as a solution that would help fellow dental professionals build mental resilience, foster connection and meaning and thrive.

Mind Ninja offers a comprehensive range of training, coaching and wellness products that go beyond reducing symptoms of stress to generating a solid foundation of positive well-being. These tools are designed to help dental professionals thrive in any environment, ensuring that their own bright smiles

come from a place of genuine mental health. Dr Khwaja has delivered Mind Ninja’s bespoke workshops and well-being programmes to bring transformative change to a diverse range of organisations, including NHS Oxford Health, King’s College London, Acteon, British Dental Association and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow. Mind Ninja received Global Health Pharma’s 2022 Award for Excellence in Innovation and was a shortlisted finalist at the Private Dentistry Awards in 2021 and 2020.

Mind Ninja’s flagship wellness product is the Mind Flossing Toolkit. This multi-purpose deck of well-being cards features positive psychology interventions that inform and inspire dental professionals to build on their strengths and develop a growth mindset as well as practise mindfulness, self-compassion and gratitude, both in the dental clinic and at home. The verdict is already in: 100% of users report an improvement in their mental well-being after using the toolkit.

Dr Khwaja has been named in the Top 50 in Dentistry two years in a row (2022 and 2021) by FMC for her work on Mental Health in Dentistry. She is also the author of the upcoming book ‘Resilience and Well-being for Dental Professionals’, scheduled for release in autumn 2022 by Wiley-Blackwell.

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