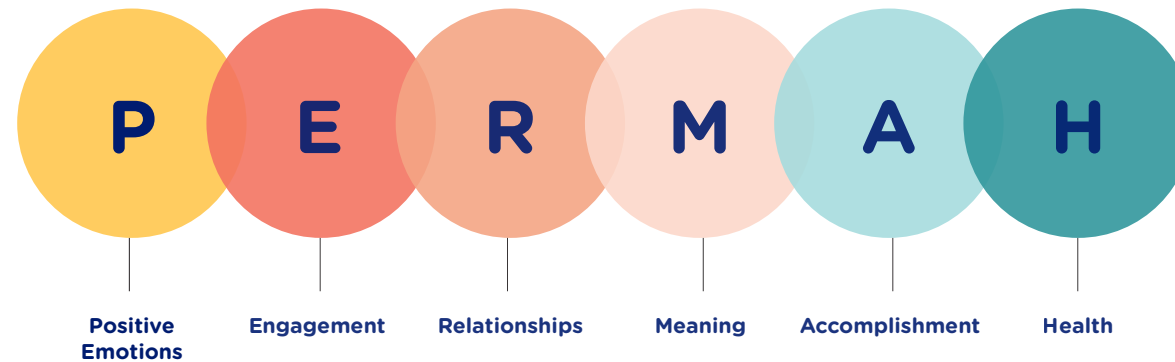


# Positive Emotion to Build Resilience in Dentistry

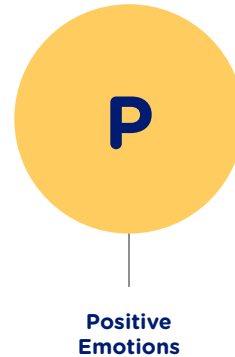
## Part of The Well-being Toolkit for Dental Professionals

In collaboration with Dr Mahrukh Khwaja,  
Dentist and Positive Psychologist





Dr Martin Seligman's PERMA model explores five pillars for flourishing and thriving at work and beyond.<sup>1</sup> It suggests that well-being is cultivated by the presence of a rich diet of positive emotions, feeling engaged, connected through positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment. Since 2012, a further component has been added to incorporate health factors, known as the PERMA-H model.<sup>2</sup>



# Positive emotion to build resilience in dentistry

Do you ever feel anxious or overwhelmed by your work? Do you ever feel frustrated that you are not meeting your own high standards? You're not alone. Stress is common amongst dental professionals<sup>3</sup> and it goes without saying this stress may have been amplified in recent years.

This article discusses how the PERMA-H model can be used as a strategy to help build resilience and combat stress and burnout in dentistry, with

expert tips from Dr Mahrukh Khwaja: dentist, positive psychologist and author of the book 'Resilience and well-being for Dental Professionals'. It focuses on the first component of PERMA-H; 'positive emotion'.

At the end of the article you will find activity sheets which have been specially designed to be printed so that you can work on them for yourself.



## Positive emotion: a key component of resilience

Positive emotions such as joy, gratitude, optimism, self-compassion, serenity, interest, hope and love all contribute to our happiness and wellbeing. They make us feel good in the moment but also have longer-lasting effects. The 'broaden and build' theory explains how positive emotions expand our mindsets to improve our ability to cope with and thrive during stressful situations.<sup>4</sup>

Positive emotions broaden our thought-action repertoire. For example, joy sparks the urge to play, interest sparks the urge to explore and contentment sparks the urge to savour and integrate. This 'broadened' mindset helps us 'build' a collection of long-lasting physical, intellectual, psychological and social resources which can be drawn on in times of stress.

It is important we nurture and cultivate positive emotions to help us achieve long-term psychological and physical wellbeing.<sup>4</sup> Simple ways to do this include making time for activities that bring us joy or spending time with the ones we love. However, in reality, when negotiating the challenges of daily life and dentistry work, nurturing and cultivating positive emotions can seem hard. Therefore, it is important to have strategies and techniques to integrate into our everyday lives.





## Boosting positive emotions

One way of growing positive emotions is through practising self-compassion. Compassion involves recognising someone's suffering and responding with kindness. Self-compassion is simply applying this to yourself. That is, responding to your own experiences with kindness to yourself rather than being critical or judgmental.<sup>5,6</sup> It is common for dental professionals to be 'perfectionists' or feel personally responsible for unmet goals or difficult patient encounters.<sup>7</sup>

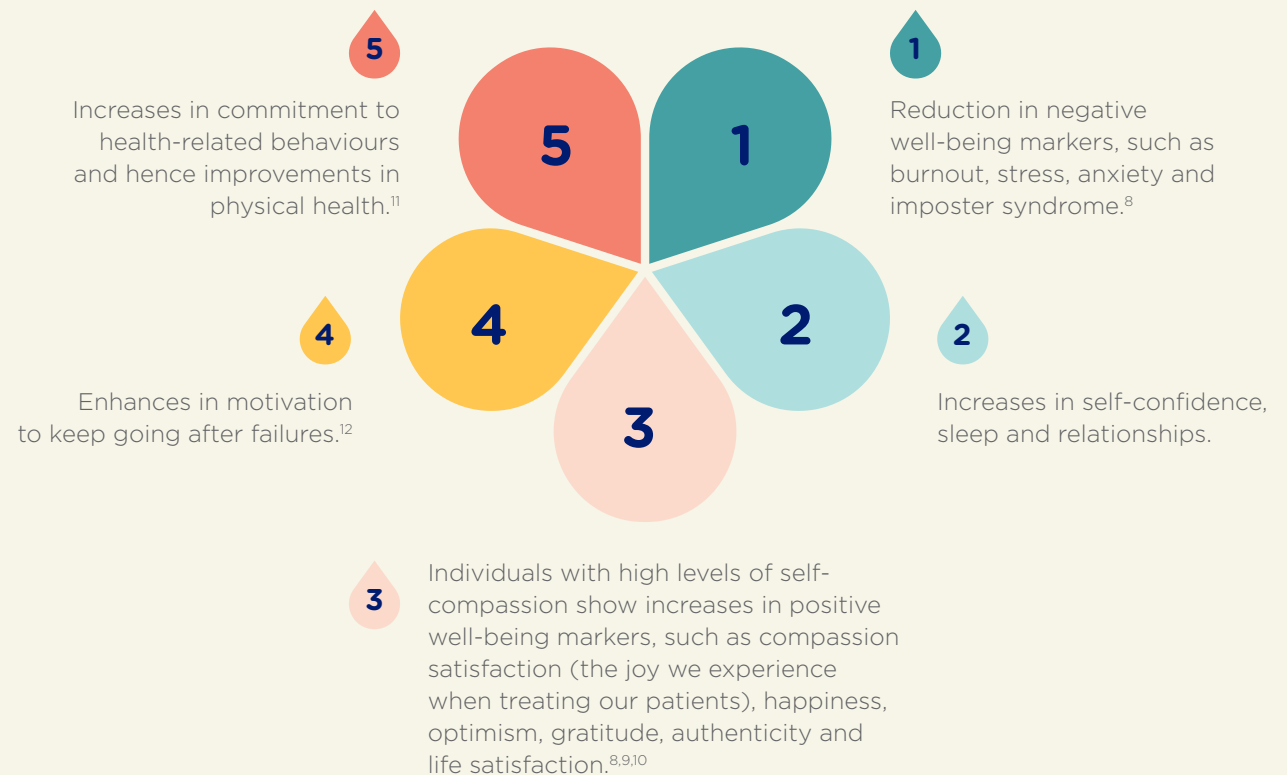
There are numerous life-changing impacts of self-compassion for dental professionals. In the box on the next page, Dr Mahrukh Khwaja summarises the latest scientific findings.





DR MAHRUKH KHWAJA

# Transformative Benefits of Self- compassion for Dental Professionals





# Three ways to improve your self-compassion

Dr Kristen Neff outlines self-compassion, breaking it down into three elements:<sup>6</sup>

1

## Mindfulness

Focusing on the present moment in a non-judgmental way, and taking on an observer role, rather than getting lost in the story of our thoughts.



2

## Common Humanity

Suffering and mistakes are part of a shared human experience. Remind yourself that you are not alone in your experience of challenges and stress at work.



3

## Self kindness

Treating yourself with the same understanding and kindness you would if you were responding to a friend or colleague.





DR MAHRUKH KHWAJA

## Putting Self-compassion into Practice

When you notice stress, or a harsh critical thought pop up, use Neff's 3 components to practise self-compassion in the moment.

1

Take a mindful deep breath, ensuring the exhale is longer than the inhale to trigger the parasympathetic nervous system and invite positive emotions, such as serenity and calm. Mindfulness helps us to take a step back and not fuse with these thoughts. It may help to say to yourself, "I notice I'm having a thought that..." Labelling our thoughts helps to create some distance and take on an observer role with our thoughts.

2

Remind yourself that you are not alone in your experience of dental stress or negative thoughts when with patients. In fact, these are common and natural, albeit not often discussed openly. Remind yourself how, as dental professionals working so closely with patients, we are all connected by these similar experiences.

3

Talk to yourself with warmth, kindness and generosity as you would a friend. You may say to yourself, "I'm so sorry you're experiencing this. I'm here to support you. What do you need right now to feel better?". Offer yourself physical touch, such as squeezing your arm, to self-soothe in the moment.





DR MAHRUKH KHWAJA

## More Top Tips for Exercising the Muscle of Self-compassion

Here are some tips to integrate self-compassion practices when with patients and at home:

1

Find ways to infuse mindfulness into your work day. Use the Mindfulness Well-being Tool at the end of this chapter to help with this.

2

Journal on your self-talk to note common thinking traps and reframe thoughts in a compassionate way.

3

Remind yourself that perfection does not exist, and focus on your progress instead.

4

Work on setting boundaries at work and home. Say no when you have reached your full capacity.

5

Prioritise rest, regular self-care and nutritious food.

Self-compassion is just one positive emotion we can amplify. Making time for joy, gratitude, optimism, serenity, interest, hope and love in your own way is really important too. Your ability to experience happiness and feel positive emotions is something that can be learned and will improve with practice – and what a great thing to practise!

To get started on your own resilience training and developing positive emotions, try some of Dr Khwaja's activities on the following pages. These exercise pages have been specially designed to be printed so you can complete them for yourself.

## Further reading

**Barbara Fredrickson: Positive emotions open our mind**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7dFDHzV36g&t=37s>

**Dr Kristen Neff: Self-compassion**  
<https://self-compassion.org/the-three-elements-of-self-compassion-2/>

**Dr Khwaja's gratitude meditation**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1cmm6Suvhwk>



1. Seligman M. 2011. Flourish. 978-1-4391-9075-3. 2. Lai M et al. Frontiers in Psychology 2018; 9: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01090> 3. Kay EJ and Lower JC. British Dental Journal 2007; 204: 1-10. 4. Fredrickson B. Am Psychol. 2001 Mar; 56(3): 218-226. 5. Neff K. Self-compassion: what self-compassion is not. 6. Available at: <https://self-compassion.org/what-self-compassion-is-not-2/>. Accessed: May 2022. 7. Neff K. Self-compassion: definition of self-compassion. 8. Available at: <https://self-compassion.org/the-three-elements-of-self-compassion-2/>. Accessed: May 2022. 9. Rada R and Johnson-Leong. JADA. 2004; 135: 788-94. 10. Neff K et al. Journal of Clinical Psychology 2020; 76(9): 1543-1562. 11. Yang et al. Child Indicators Research 2019; 1-15. 12. Zhang et al. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 2020; 46(2): 228-242. 13. Biber, D. D. & Ellis, R. Journal of health psychology 2019; 24(14): 2060-2071. 14. Neff et al. Self and Identity 2005; 4: 263-287.



DR MAHRUKH KHWAJA

ACTIVITY 1

## Developing the Self-compassionate Inner Voice

Self-compassion helps us to respond to ourselves with self-kindness as opposed to self-criticism.

Research shows this to be a much better motivator in helping us to create sustainable positive habits, to keep trying after setbacks and reduce negative states, such as depression, anxiety, stress and shame.<sup>1</sup> Try these journaling prompts to help you reflect on your inner dialogue and develop a kinder, loving inner voice in the face of dental stressors.



## Developing The Self-compassionate Inner Voice

Reflect on a recent time at work where you experienced stress or a challenge; for example a difficult dental procedure, running late or managing a complicated case; and you responded with a critical inner thought. Write down the thoughts that popped up for you and reflect on how this impacted your feelings and actions that day e.g. "I'm not good enough", this made me feel upset and I ended up chewing over this thought for a long time. I didn't end up going to the gym.

Imagine the same situation happening to a loved one or close friend. What types of things would you say to them? What non-verbal responses would you show to comfort them?

What words of self-kindness can you use instead when you experience stress at work? Which physical gestures can you use in the moment you feel that stress, to soothe yourself? Eg. say to myself "I'm so sorry you're going through this. What do you need right now to feel better?" Take a mindful deep breath, squeeze my arm, remind myself that I'm not alone in experiencing challenges.

Is there a difference in how you responded and the types of things you would say to a loved one?

1. Neff, K. and Germer, C. 2018: The mindful self-compassion workbook: A proven way to accept yourself, build inner strength, and thrive.



**DR MAHRUKH KHWAJA**

**ACTIVITY 2**

## Mindfulness Well-being Tool

Mindfulness is an evidenced-based tool that can be used to invite positive emotions to our everyday: from gratitude, to self-compassion, serenity and calm.

The research amongst healthcare professionals spotlights further transformative benefits, including compassion satisfaction (the joy we get from treating our patients), resilience, meaning, improved interpersonal relationships and enhanced self-care behaviours.<sup>1</sup> Use the table below to consider which mindfulness activities you can try when with patients, team members and at home.

1. Kunzler A M, et al. Psychological interventions to foster resilience in healthcare professionals. Cochrane Database Syst Rev 2020; 7: CD012527.



## Mindfulness Well-being Tool

- Practise eating with presence rather than mindlessly eating
- During lunchtime, when you take your first 3 bites of food, hone into the experience of eating by slowing down and noticing all your 5 senses: What do you see? Note the textures, shape and colours in your food. What can you smell? What lastly can you taste? Notice all the different flavours of your food.
- Spend 5 minutes outdoors concentrating on the sensation of walking. Slow down. Hone into as many senses as possible: what can you see? What can you hear? What can you smell? What can you taste? What does it feel like to slowly take mindful steps? If you notice your mind wander, gently nudge it back to the present by honing back to your senses.
- Enhance self-compassion through using Neff's 3 step process.
- Here is a link to an audio file to guide you through this activity.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SSVh7MuJYuk&t=99s>
- Increase the mind-body connection.
- Here is a link to an audio file to guide you through this activity.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4V1JpzTnz1A>



- Enhance emotional awareness through this check-in. Use this before bringing your patient in or at different points in your day.
- Here is a link to an audio file to guide you through this activity.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=806GMo7XLZI&list=UUzmz1fQcCLhIB-8N6ZVV0KQ&index=13>
- Bring presence and awareness during moments of stress using this short mindfulness micropractice.
- Place a couple of aromatherapy drops, such as lavender, onto a tissue and take 3 deep breaths. Anchor to the scent as you take a deep inhale and exhale. If you notice your mind wander, gently nudge it back to the aroma.
- Improve your listening and empathy skills through this mindful listening practice.
- For the next 5 minutes you are with a dental colleague, give your entire attention to them. Listen not to answer back, but to truly understand what they are saying. Exercise self-compassion and non-judgement.
- Enhance self-compassion.
- This meditation combines imagery with positive affirmations (mantras).
- Here is a link to an audio file to guide you through this activity.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MY83woD3mIM>

Adapted from: Khwaja, M. The transformative benefits of mindfulness in dentistry. VOL 35 | ISSUE 6 | BDJ IN PRACTICE

### The Well-being Toolkit for Dental Professionals:

part 1 of 6 of a Unilever mini-series on how to flourish, thrive and avoid burnout in dentistry

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DR MAHRUKH KHWAJA

### ACTIVITY 3

## Growing Gratitude

The practice of gratitude is a scientifically proven way to boost our positive emotions and build our resilience.<sup>1</sup>

This muscle can be exercised by us actively hunting for the positives in our work day. In this way, as dental professionals, we are also building kinder, positive work cultures that make us feel good and impact the well-being of others too. Try these journaling prompts in the evening to help you grow gratitude. Start by reflecting on your day with patients and your dental team.



## ACTIVITY 3

## Growing Gratitude

Write down 3 good things that happened today. These examples could be big or small, for example: a treatment that went well, a patient compliment, an anxious patient leaving the practice happier and at ease or feeling supported by your dental colleagues.

How have these gratitude points helped you today?

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Sometimes we don't clearly share our gratitude at work. Reflecting on points 1 and 2, is there a person you can express your thanks to at work? Which small acts of kindness can you show to share your gratitude with them? e.g. offering a helping hand, making a cup of tea or writing them a positive sticky note.

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1. Lamas T., et al. 2014; Gratitude interventions: A review and future agenda. In A. C. Parks & S. M. Schueller (Eds.), The Wiley Blackwell handbook of positive psychological interventions (pp. 3-19). Wiley Blackwell.