

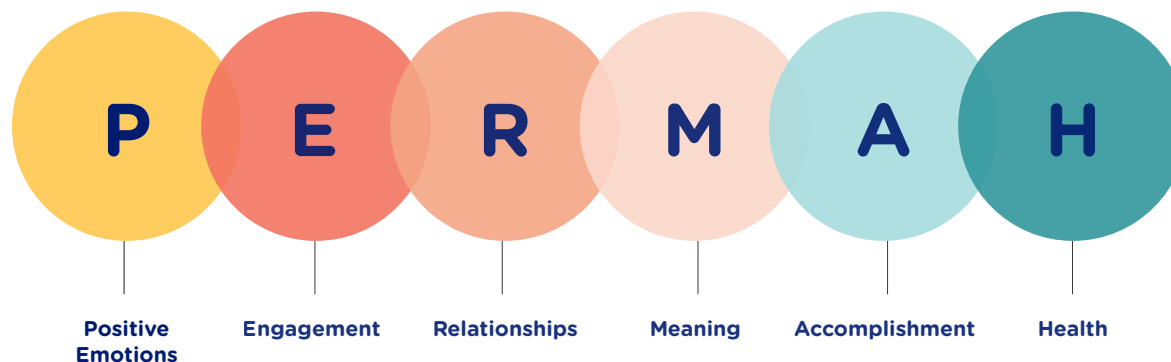
Relationships as a Stress Buffer in Dentistry

Part of The Well-being Toolkit for Dental Professionals

In collaboration with Dr Mahrukh Khwaja,
Dentist and Positive Psychologist



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Dr Martin Seligman's PERMA model explores five pillars for flourishing and thriving at work and beyond.¹ 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.²



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Relationships

Relationships as a stress buffer in dentistry

Do you ever feel lonely or isolated at work? Over the last few years relationships, both personal and professional, have been put under immense strain, a known factor that contributes to stress and burnout among dental professionals.³ Add to the challenge short appointment times, solo practice (sometimes in remote areas), or the simple fact that it's difficult for patients to talk back, it's easy to see how dentistry can be lonely, and why building relationships as a dental professional can be challenging.⁴ But as we emerge from the effects of the pandemic, what are some of the things we can learn from how we coped with isolation,

quarantine and social distancing? And how can we use those to improve our relationships as we re-enter a normal way of life?

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 third component of PERMA-H; 'relationships' and how building quality social connections can help.



Relationships: the single most important factor associated with happiness, health and longevity

Social connectedness through relationships is a measure of how much we feel a sense of belonging or closeness to other people in our life.⁵ Quality relationships are a fundamental human need and play a major role in enhancing our health and well-being.^{3,5,6} They help us avoid anxiety, depression and burnout.³ The best way to have quality relationships is to seek out people in your personal and professional life who bring you joy, peace and support. If this feels a little daunting or unachievable, there are strategies you can employ to help you nurture and grow positive relationships.





Positive connections at work can help to reduce the likelihood of burnout by:⁵

1

Increasing well-being and buffering against stress

2

Improving emotional regulation and mental health





Building high-quality connections at work



Despite the inherent obstacle to building relationships at work in the dental health environment, even short moments of ‘high-quality connection’ have numerous benefits and can contribute to relationships over time.⁷ They improve how you function, recover from loss or illness and adapt to difficult situations. You can achieve these high-quality connections by being mindful of negativity, focusing on positives and being empathetic.^{7,8}

In particular, focusing on good news and events can strengthen relationships and have a positive impact on well-being above and beyond the effects of the event itself.^{8,9} They can help establish commitment, satisfaction and trust. This can be as simple as asking a colleague how they felt after receiving positive news, or getting them to talk you through an experience so you can re-live it with them. This is known as an ‘active-constructive response’ and it’s a strong driver of higher quality relationships.⁹



DR MAHRUKH KHWAJA

Making Every Interaction Count! — Pathways to High Quality Connections in Dentistry

Drawing from the fascinating research from Jane Dutton and others on strengthening High Quality Connections, we can deepen our relationships and create positive work cultures in the process — built on respect, kindness and helpfulness to our team members and patients. In dentistry, we may do this through:

1

Positive communication

This focuses on using communication styles that are framed around increasing positive emotions. One way we can do this is through posing questions to our patients and team members that unearth a common ground and convey genuine interest, for example: in the next 3 months, what are you most excited about? What's your favourite hobby outside of work? What has been the most meaningful part of your week?



DR MAHRUKH KHWAJA

2

Lean into gratitude

One easy way to build positive relationships is to share thanks with our patients and team. Prioritise gratitude through having regular gratitude conversations with all members of your team, sharing your thanks and what that means to you. You can do this with patients also — celebrating moments of connection by letting them know how grateful you are for their sense of humour, interesting anecdotes and acknowledging their patience, generosity and kindness. Notice the beautiful upwards spiral of positive emotions when you share your gratitude!



**DR MAHRUKH KHWAJA**

3

Mindful listening

This involves listening to our patients and team members without judgment, interruption or criticism. Listening with our full attention and with the intention to understand the perspective of the other person rather than respond is not easy. However, with practice we can hone our abilities. Try this mindful listening activity to start exercising your mindful muscle: For the next 10 minutes, when speaking to a team member, place your entire focus on them. Rather than thinking of immediately responding, encourage your colleague to continue to express their thoughts using non-verbal gestures, such as smiling, nodding and maintaining eye contact. Reflect words and emotions expressed back to your colleague. When you notice your mind wander (this is quite natural!), gently nudge your attention with loving kindness back to what is being said.

4

Seeking mentors:

All the features of a High Quality Connection (positive emotions, feeling energised and sense of common ground) are fostered through interactions with a mentor or coach. Teams can also build a mentoring culture through senior staff talking through clinical cases and sharing their challenges and how they navigated them.





Steps you can take to improve social connections in your daily life:⁷⁻¹¹





Loneliness or professional isolation is something that many dental professionals experience at some point in their career.⁴ There are many things that you can do to combat these feelings, such as sharing issues and problems with colleagues, your employer or mentor, but it may be difficult to know where to start. This podcast, from Dr Khwaja, contains evidence-based strategies to combat loneliness:

<https://www.practiceplan.co.uk/loneliness-and-isolation-in-dentistry/?cn-reloaded=1>



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DR MAHRUKH KHWAJA

ACTIVITY

Nurturing Positive Relationships



Nurturing Positive Relationships

Consider a positive relationship at work with a team member. What are the features that make this relationship positive, joyful and bring meaning to your everyday? What aspects of the relationship help spark common ground, and make you feel energised?

In what ways can you increase more moments of connection with this person? What small steps would you take to further strengthen this relationship?

Consider a goal that you are currently working on and whether support from a mentor, coach or loved one could benefit you. Are there specific aspects you want help on or an accountability buddy? List names of individuals that would help you move forward and thrive.

Reflecting on relationships outside of work, are there positive relationships with friends or loved ones that you haven't recently had time for? What activities can you do to reconnect with them? When can you schedule these activities, either daily, weekly or monthly? This could be as simple as sending a text, having a video call or pencilling in a dinner.