

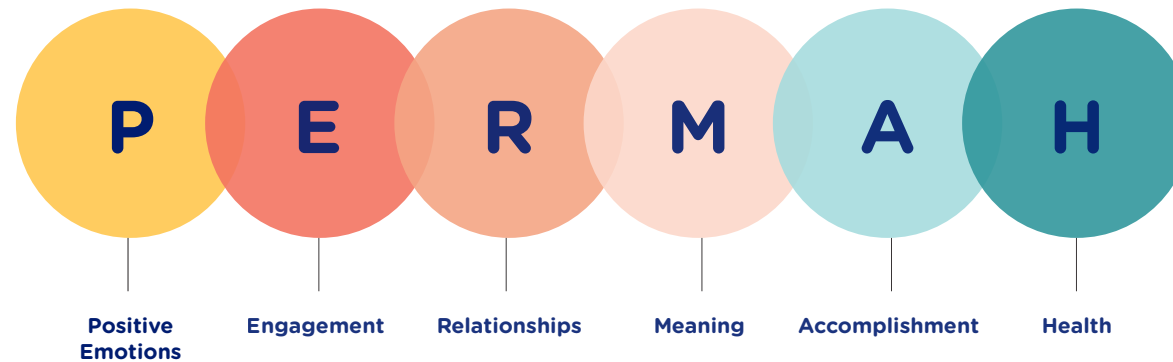
# Finding Meaning in Everyday Practice

## 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.<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>



M

Meaning



M

Meaning

# Finding meaning in everyday practice

How often do you find yourself doing activities you find meaningful? You may not have given it much thought. But it is worth thinking about because spending time on activities that don't feel meaningful is the largest predictor of burnout amongst healthcare professionals.<sup>3</sup>

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 fourth component of PERMA-H; 'meaning'.

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

part 4 of 6 of a Unilever mini-series on how to flourish, thrive and avoid burnout in dentistry

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## Meaning can have a huge impact on happiness in the workplace

Meaning is an important psychological phenomenon that helps reduce depression and increase resilience.<sup>4,5</sup> It means having a sense of purpose as a dental professional and as a human being. What you do in your day-to-day practice, and your sense of purpose while doing it, has an impact on your risk of burnout.<sup>1</sup> Tasks that feel like they lack meaning, such as filling out documentation and other tasks that are not directly helping patients and the practice, can contribute to burnout.<sup>6</sup>

Finding meaning is personal and different for each individual. For dental professionals there is an inherent level of meaning that comes with a job in healthcare and simply remembering why you got into dentistry can help you realise the meaning of your daily work.<sup>7</sup> There are also opportunities in clinical practice, research and teaching that may bring meaning for you.<sup>7</sup>





DR MAHRUKH KHWAJA

## The Transformative Power of Applying Our Values in Dentistry

Understanding our core values as a dental professional may help us invite purpose, makes us feel more energised at work and also connected to something bigger than we are. Values we often use with our patients include compassion, kindness, support, service, teamwork, growth and integrity. These values can help transform our experience of working with patients, through guiding us in our actions when we come across challenges at work. Having coached dental professionals who experience lack of day-to-day meaning, reconnecting with their 'why' for this career, has helped to remind them that they are making a genuine difference to their patients' lives. This in itself encourages a spiral of positive emotions and gives a sense of greater purpose.

To help identify your own values, use my worksheet at the end of this article and the table of values from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy<sup>8</sup> (ACT) which accompanies it.

You can also use my 'Values' meditation, which helps you to tap into your authentic self through exploring your values.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCFnZWCgAVw>





# Tips on finding meaning inside and outside of work



6

Teach the next generation: passing on your wisdom and helping them to find meaning as well. Dentists who see their work as a form of giving consistently rank their job as more meaningful<sup>9</sup>

5

The concept of 'meaning' is highly individual, so don't worry if what drives you is different to your colleagues<sup>7</sup>

1

Small acts of kindness at work can bring you a lot of meaning

2

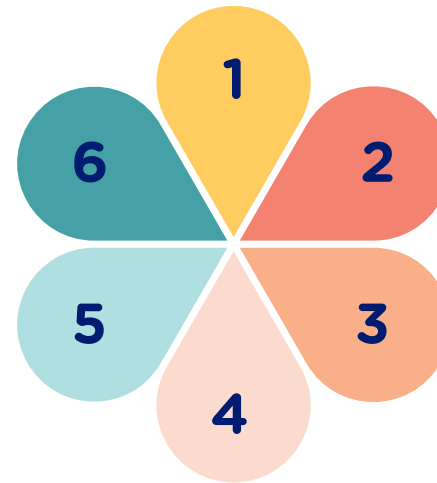
Be prepared for what you find meaningful to change with time - you aren't the same person in your 20s as you are in your 50s, and what drives you won't be the same either<sup>7</sup>

3

Try creating meaning in activities outside of work — it's okay for purpose to come from multiple sources<sup>7</sup>

4

Volunteering, taking a sabbatical or working with humanitarian aid organisations to take your skills to less privileged parts of the world can be a great way to find meaning in dentistry





DR MAHRUKH KHWAJA

## Small Acts of Kindness – Big Impacts on Meaning

We can all be active creators in building a positive work culture in dentistry. Here are some suggestions on how we can utilise small acts of kindness to bring happiness and greater meaning to the dental team.

1

Offer a helping hand to a team member struggling with a difficult task

2

Make a cup of tea for your colleague

3

Offer your entire attention to your colleague and listen to learn more, rather than to respond

4

Be thoughtful in how you respond to others and mindful of their perspective

5

Leave a note of gratitude

6

Ask your team member what's going well in their life

7

Send an encouraging message to a colleague

8

Forgive mistakes and look for ways you can help colleagues improve

1. Seligman M. Flourish. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster; 2011. 2. Lai M et al. A Multidimensional PERMA-H Positive Education Model, General Satisfaction of School Life, and Character Strengths Use in Hong Kong Senior Primary School Students: Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Path Analysis Using the APASO-II. *Front Psychol.* 2018; Jun 29;9:1090. 3. Shanafelt T et al. Career fit and burnout among academic faculty. *Arch Intern Med.* 2009;169: 990-5. 4. Gander F et al. Positive Psychology Interventions Addressing Pleasure, Engagement, Meaning, Positive Relationships, and Accomplishment Increase Well-Being and Ameliorate Depressive Symptoms: A Randomized, Placebo-Controlled Online Study. *Front Psychol.* 2016;May 20;7:686. 5. Wong P. Viktor Frankl's Meaning-Seeking Model and Positive Psychology. *Meaning in Positive and Existential Psychology* pp 149-184. 6. West CP et al. Physician burnout: contributors, consequences and solutions. *J Intern Med.* 2018;283:516-529. 7. Knežević M. Dentistry as a passion. *Essentials of Dental Medicine.* 2018. 8. Hayes S et al. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Contextual Behavioral Science: Examining the Progress of a Distinctive Model of Behavioral and Cognitive Therapy. *Behav Ther.* 2013;44(2):180-198. 9. Grant A. In the company of givers and takers. *Harvard Business Review.* 2013;91(4):90-7.

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DR MAHRUKH KHWAJA

ACTIVITY 1

## Identifying Your Values

One key way we can bring our values into action as a dental professional, is to align our values with our goals. When we create value-aligned goals, we are honing into a type of motivation called 'intrinsic motivation'. This type of motivation helps us stick to our goals long-term because the reason behind the goal aligns fully with what matters to us the most. Try the following worksheet to help you delve into your values further.





**M** — **Meaning**

**ACTIVITY 1**

### Identifying Your Values

Look at the ACT table and list below the 10 values that immediately resonate with you. Think of values that link directly with working with patients, the team and also your personal life.

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Looking through the 10 values, chose the top 5 that resonate the most. To help you select your top 5, think of how these values have directed you during challenging times, or helped you feel more energised.

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Reflect on one or two of your values. Consider examples of how can you bring this value into an action with patients, your dental career, in relationships, hobbies or your personal life. E.g. if growth and leadership are top values for you, you may want to consider exploring a leadership course, or if health is a top value, then consider ways you can prioritise good nutrition.

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**M** — **Meaning**

**ACT Table**



Accountability  
Accuracy  
Achievement  
Adventurousness  
Altruism  
Ambition  
Assertiveness  
Balance  
Belonging  
Boldness  
Calmness  
Carefulness  
Challenge  
Cheerfulness  
Commitment  
Community  
Compassion  
Competitiveness  
Consistency  
Contentment  
Contribution  
Control  
Cooperation  
Correctness  
Courtesy  
Creativity  
Curiosity

Decisiveness  
Dependability  
Determination  
Devoutness  
Diligence  
Discipline  
Discretion  
Diversity  
Dynamism  
Economy  
Effectiveness  
Efficiency  
Elegance  
Empathy  
Enjoyment  
Enthusiasm  
Equality  
Excellence  
Excitement  
Expertise  
Exploration  
Expressiveness  
Fairness  
Faith  
Fidelity  
Fitness  
Fluency

Focus  
Freedom  
Fun  
Generosity  
Goodness  
Grace  
Growth  
Happiness  
Hard Work  
Health  
Helping Society  
Holiness  
Honesty  
Honor  
Humility  
Independence  
Ingenuity  
Inner Harmony  
Inquisitiveness  
Insightfulness  
Intelligence  
Intellectual Status  
Intuition  
Joy  
Justice  
Leadership  
Legacy

Love  
Loyalty  
Making a difference  
Mastery  
Merit  
Obedience  
Openness  
Order  
Originality  
Patriotism  
Perfection  
Piety  
Positivity  
Practicality  
Preparedness  
Professionalism  
Prudence  
Quality-orientation  
Reliability  
Resourcefulness  
Restraint  
Security  
Self-actualization  
Self-control  
Selflessness  
Self-reliance  
Sensitivity

Serenity  
Service  
Shrewdness  
Simplicity  
Soundness  
Speed  
Spontaneity  
Stability  
Strategic  
Strength  
Structure  
Success  
Support  
Teamwork  
Temperance  
Thankfulness  
Thoroughness  
Thoughtfulness  
Timeliness  
Tolerance  
Traditionalism  
Trustworthiness  
Truth-seeking  
Understanding  
Uniqueness  
Usefulness  
Vision  
Vitality



**M** — Meaning

**ACTIVITY 1**

**Identifying Your Values**

Write down your goals for the next year in relation to the 4 life quadrants below: work, relationships, health and leisure. Consider how your top values align with these goals. If there is a mismatch, consider new goals that sit more closely with your values.

What small steps can you take in achieving your top value-based goals? Consider when you can schedule this in, rewards to celebrate your progress and how you can enlist support from friends and family to keep you accountable.

<p><b>Work</b></p>	
<p><b>Relationships</b></p>	
<p><b>Health</b></p>	
<p><b>Leisure</b></p>	

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DR MAHRUKH KHWAJA

ACTIVITY 2

## Finding the Silver Lining

Finding the hidden positives in certain challenges we face in dentistry can help us become more resilient, as we recognise the growth that occurs despite the stressful time. This is also another practical way we can invite more meaning. This journaling worksheet helps us to reveal the hidden benefits of our challenges.



**M** — **Meaning**

**ACTIVITY 2**

**Finding the Silver Lining**

Write down a challenge you've experienced at work. How did this event challenge your beliefs about yourself and the world? How did it impact your levels of meaning?

How did you make sense of this adversity? What small or big avenues did you find to invite more meaning, post-challenge?

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How did you grow through this challenge? Consider what positive learnings came out of this time for you.

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