

# Professional Burnout in Dentistry : A Review

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## Abstract

Professional burnout is a psychological problem that occurs because of extreme exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation, because of chronic stress this usually leads to the development of a negative or cynical attitude towards one's patients or clients and the tendency to evaluate oneself negatively. Dentistry is a very demanding profession particularly in India and especially for the young and newly graduates. Creating a niche in this competitive profession may lead to a stressful life resulting in burnout. Timely preventing its development and if developed reversing it is very important for a professional. If not done than the dentist may lose interest in the profession.

**Keywords :** Dentistry, Profession, Burnout.

## Introduction

Life is a challenge and according to a quote by Bette Davis "The key to life is accepting challenges. Once someone stops doing this, he's dead." To live a happy life one should keep this inspiring quote in mind. Sometimes due to continuous stress and problems in life a person loses its aim and stops being zealous and adventurous. Similarly dental profession is a very challenging profession and to keep up to the standards requires continuous hard work and efforts. This might sometimes lead to professional burnout.

Professional burnout can be defined as "a state of fatigue or frustration that results from the dedication to a cause, a way of life or a relationship that does not produce the expected outcomes." It occurs because of extreme exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation, because of chronic stress. Three dimensions of professional burnout are mental or emotional exhaustion, the development of a negative or cynical attitude towards one's patients or clients, and the tendency to evaluate oneself negatively.<sup>1,2</sup> This psychological problem was first clinically described in 1974 by American

psychiatrist Herbert Freudenberger.<sup>3</sup> It has been found that 10.6 % dentists suffer from burnout in UK<sup>4</sup> and with the passing time it is found that the numbers of dentists suffering from professional burnout is increasing.

### Signs & Symptoms of Burnout

Signs and symptoms of burnout are depression, lack of energy, lack of desire, decreased productivity, increased absences and/or tardiness, abuse of alcohol/drugs, boredom, anger/resentment in the workplace, sleep problems and the inability to relax.<sup>5-7</sup> The risk factor for developing burnout amongst dentist is the solo-oriented practice. Dentistry is such a profession where usually the clinician is the lone practitioner and hence the work place becomes boring. Working place no longer seems fun or enjoyable, as there is nobody to rejoice any professional accomplishment, finishing of a good case or discuss any treatment option.

### Physiologic Mechanism

The physiologic mechanism behind this phenomenon is that, during stress the reactive part of the brain which is the lower automatic brain is more active than the reflective part that is prefrontal cortex.<sup>8</sup> The reactive part addresses the involuntary behaviors and prompt

emotional reactions. When a person is in a state of chronic stress, inadvertently the reactive part is stimulated in any situation and responds accordingly which means lacking a reflective approach that is problem-solving approach and rather losing emotional control. This leads to increase self doubting level, lack of motivation and decreased efficiency. The best thing about the above stated mechanism is that it is reversible. By exercising a control over the reactive part of the brain and stimulating the reflective part the burnout can be reversed and the burnt-out professional can again redeem his life by a fresh start.

### Reasons for Development of Burnout

Dentistry is a very demanding profession that requires continuous hard work and dedication hence the reasons for developing burnout are numerous. If we start with the struggles that a newly graduated dentist in India faces, than the first one would be meager job availabilities rather it would be true to state nil job opportunities. Only 1% of the total GDP is allocated for public healthcare moreover, there is no specific separate allocation for oral health-care. There are only 11,000 sanctioned Government jobs for dentists in India.<sup>9</sup>



Immediately after graduation that is after working hard and slogging for five years it is found that the professional does not get employed rather have to pay for observation at the clinical setup.

The only way to survive financially is to set up a private practice or get a job in a dental institution. For a graduate professional private practice is more rewarding. The various issues pertaining to it are increased work pressure; taking care of the financial aspects; building patient contacts which is time & effort consuming and requires good communication skills; sorting out work content; looking after the career aspects and future growth and responsibility of establishing oneself in the competitive professional world.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, sorting all the above issues utilizes most of the time and leaving no time for leisure activities. On accord of the busy schedule a dentist leads a sedentary lifestyle with no exercise and increased chronic occupational stress may lead to diseases such as Coronary Heart Disease (CHD). Other health problems associated with physically demanding dental profession are backache and gastritis. It becomes difficult to establish balance between professional and personal life for a dentist as a result of the busy schedule. Most of the professionals find that working as a dentist means repetitive schedules, repetitive motions and repetitive procedures. Lack of learning and too much redundancy leads to long term problem associated with occupational stress.

#### Methods for Measuring Burnout

Work engagement (vigor, dedication and absorption), can be measured by the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale; where vigor is characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest efforts in one's work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties; dedication is characterized by a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, challenge and absorption is characterized by being fully concentrated and deeply engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work.<sup>11</sup> Another scale is Maslach Burnout Inventory that evaluates emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment.<sup>12</sup> The level of burnout in a professional can be evaluated by these scales and accordingly management can be done.

#### Management Steps for Combating Burnout

Burnout should be taken as an opportunity to revive oneself. The development of burnout itself states that massive emotional and psychological change is required. The first step in combating burnout is identifying the reason for its development. The reason might differ from one individual to another. By taking out some lone time during which an individual can be in coherence with the inner self would help in recognizing the cause of burnout. Connect can be developed by indulging in an individual's favorite leisure activity which might be taking a quiet walk alone; sitting at the favorite place and reading a book/ journal. These activities would also aid in knowing what one actually wants by listening to the inner feelings.

The second step comprises of taking appropriate and necessary actions to make the change possible. Continuous evaluation of oneself is to be done by asking pertinent questions; doing regular attitude check; seeking information to help via books, CDs and Continuing Education courses and networking with other dentists. Each dentist should reflect upon their work occasionally and stimulate themselves to actively include those aspects of work that they value in their practice.

A recent development within burnout research is the shift from the traditional concept and scope to its opposite that is work engagement.<sup>11,13-15</sup> Burnout is the negative pole of a continuum, with engagement representing the positive antipode.

Another emerging trend for managing psychological problems is positive psychology that focuses on human strengths and optimal functioning rather than on weaknesses and malfunctioning.<sup>16</sup> For that one can get further help from a general practitioner, a cognitive behavioral therapist, a psychologist or a psychiatrist.<sup>17</sup> To cope up with physical fatigue the personnel should follow ergonomic dentistry; can use ergonomic chairs and should take time out between long dental procedures to relax. To cope up with psychological fatigue continuous change and reinvention is required for that a separate pantry can be kept; keep changing the dental operatory atmosphere by renovating it and can listen to favorite music during free time. Incorporate

regular self-care into your routine (e.g., 30 minutes exercise four days a week).

#### Conclusion

One should always remember the zeal and enthusiasm with which they had joined dentistry and start focusing on the brighter aspect of this career option rather than looking at its negative demeanor. Dentistry is a profession that holds many opportunities for those being part of it and one should never forget the hard work that was put in for acquiring the professional license. We would like to conclude by saying that "play with your task, play with your work" the principle behind this is that during play there is production of serotonin hormone in the brain which is also termed as happiness molecules and would like to cease by saying that keep calm and stick to dentistry.

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