Faces Behind the Mask: Unveiling Mental Health Among Dental Professionals

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Conflict of Interest Disclosure Statement

- Sandra D'Amato-Palumbo, Rachael Petitti, and Jennifer Pieren report no conflict of interest associated with this course. They have no relevant financial relationships to disclose.

Short Description

Faces Behind the Mask: Unveiling Mental Health Among Dental Professionals, a free dental continuing education course that covers a wide range of topics relevant to the oral healthcare professional communityand maintaining amalgam restorations.

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Overview

This course is designed specifically for dental professionals to deepen their understanding of mental health challenges and mental well-being. Participants will learn the following skills:

- Recognize the signs and symptoms of mental health disorders, such as burnout.
- Acknowledge the importance of normalizing conversations about mental health to diminish stigma.
- Explore effective strategies for promoting self-care and resilience.
- Foster a supportive work environment.
- Maintain a healthy work-life balance.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this course, the dental professional should be able to:

- Recognize one's mental health awareness and its relevance to dental professionals.
- Recognize the signs and symptoms of stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression among dental professionals.
- Discuss the prevalence of mental health challenges among adults and dental professionals in the United States.
- Explain the importance of mental health awareness and its impact on dental professionals in clinical practice.
- Discuss professional resources to foster a supportive and compassionate work environment that promotes mental health and well-being.
- Enhance communication skills to effectively address mental health concerns with colleagues and staff.
- Identify stressors faced by dental professionals and their potential impact on mental health.
- Develop strategies for managing stress, promoting self-care, and maintaining work-life balance in the dental profession.
- Acquire knowledge of available resources, support networks, and mental health services for dental professionals.
- Explore the stigma associated with mental health challenges.
- Discuss the ethical considerations for mental health support in dental practice.
- List practical exercises for relaxation and mindfulness to promote overall well-being.

Mental Health Terminology Guide*

Anxiety: A condition characterized by feelings of apprehension or unexplained thoughts of impending doom.

Behavioral Health: A state of mental and emotional well-being and choices or actions that affect that well-being.

Behavioral Healthcare: An umbrella term that covers the assessment and treatment of mental and/or addictive disorders.

*** Mental Health Terminology Guide** [1-3]

Bias: Prejudice in favor of or against an individual or group due to a certain characteristic. This can include feelings towards an individual due to perceived mental wellness or known mental disorders.

Burnout: A state of emotional, mental, and often physical exhaustion brought on by prolonged or repeated stress.

Clinician Well-Being: A function of being satisfied with one's job, finding meaning in one's work, feeling engaged at work, having a high-quality working life, and finding professional fulfillment in work.

Depersonalization: From a clinician's perspective, having a distant feeling toward patients may lead to cynicism or sarcasm.

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of Mental Disorders: The standard guide used by behavioral health professionals to classify mental health conditions.

Discrimination: Prejudicial treatment of different categories of people or an individual due to their perceived category. Often caused by bias, stigma, or prejudice.

Illness Self-Management: Individual education on factors that exacerbate or reduce symptoms to manage risk factors and relieve symptoms without professional intervention.

Mental Health: A state of mental, emotional, and behavioral well-being. Mental health is not mutually exclusive with a mental health disorder or mental illness.

Mental Health Challenge/Issue: A broad term encompassing mental distress, mental suffering, or a mental disorder.

Mental Health Disorder (also Mental Disorder): A disturbance of brain function as categorized by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

Mental Illness: A diagnosable condition that affects thinking (mental), mood (emotional), or behavior, and is associated with distress or impaired functioning.

Mental Illness-related Stigma: Refers to the negative beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors directed towards individuals with mental health conditions. There are three forms of sigma: 1) public stigma presents as societal-level discrimination; 2) self-stigma presents as one who internalizes negative beliefs by individuals with mental illness; and 3) structural stigma includes institutional policies and practices that limit opportunities for individuals with mental illnesses.

Mental Well-being: A state in which an individual realizes their abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can contribute to their community.

Risk Factor: Something that increases a person's chance of having a disorder. These can include genetics, stressful life events/situations, brain damage, alcohol and drug use, traumatic experiences, and more.

Self-care: The practice of taking action to preserve or improve one's health, well-being, and happiness, especially during times of stress.

Serious Mental Illness: A mental disorder that interferes with some area of social functioning.

Severe Mental Illness: A term that applies to more seriously affected individuals and illnesses, including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, severe depression, anxiety disorder, or obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Stress: Stress is a normal, proportional reaction to a stressful situation or external pressure. It is normal to feel stressed about a final exam or job interview. Psychological stress is the mind's reaction to a perceived threat, real or imagined, and is necessary to adapt. However, a buildup of stress and a lack of support and/or coping mechanisms can result in toxic stress that can harm mental health.

Stressor: A physical, emotional, or psychological factor that causes strain, tension, or stress.

Substance Abuse and Addiction: An unhealthy pattern of drug, alcohol, or other chemical use that may lead to relationship, education, work, mental, and/or physical problems.

Introduction

Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stressors of life, feel self-assured with their abilities, learn and work competently, and contribute to their community. Regarded as an integral component of one's physical health and well-being, it strengthens our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, allows us to build relationships, and shapes the world we live in. Mental health is a "basic human right,"[4] whereas every person is entitled to mental well-being and should have access to the necessary living and working conditions, resources, and services to achieve and maintain sound mental health.

Mental and emotional health concerns manifest through a wide range of signs and symptoms. Five common warning signs that may indicate someone is struggling with mental illness include withdrawing from friends and social activities, changes in eating or sleeping habits, difficulty concentrating or making decisions, lack of interest in self-care or personal hygiene, and increased use of drugs or alcohol.[5] Common symptoms of mental illness include excessive anxiety, a depressed mood or a mood that fluctuates excessively, disturbing thoughts, and behaviors that are harmful or disturbing to oneself or others. Additional symptoms may include memory problems, changes in sleep patterns, seeing or hearing things that are not perceived by others, changes in personality, withdrawal from personal hobbies and interests, extreme sadness or unhappiness, and or work-family burnout.[3]

Figure 1. Mental Health Word Cloud

Hence, the first step is to recognize you may be struggling with a mental health challenge, which is often the toughest task to undertake. The second step is to learn about your mental health and be aware of the signs and symptoms that may be negatively affecting your mental, emotional, and physical health. Lastly, seeking professional help is crucial for addressing and treating mental health challenges, and for maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

Dental Hygiene or Mental Hygiene: Reflecting on One's Mental Health Through Screening Tools

In recent years, mental health screening tools have become a routine part of medical check-ups, reflecting the growing recognition of mental well-being as a critical component of one's overall health. Mental health screening tools can be powerful assessments for early detection and increased self-awareness regarding one's mental health or mental illness. These assessment resources are not considered diagnostic tools but rather valuable tools for personal insight and early detection of symptoms related to mental health conditions. When necessary, individuals should seek care from medical or mental health professionals if they are experiencing any signs and symptoms suggestive of mental illness. Thus, let's start by recognizing and acknowledging the state of one's mental health.

Now ask yourself. How are my work-life balance and mental health currently? Be completely honest with yourself: Are you often feeling stressed, overwhelmed, exhausted, or struggling to cope with your job and personal life? If you feel that your mental health might be suffering, take a meaningful step towards enhancing your self-awareness of your mental health. One of the quickest and easiest ways to determine whether you are experiencing symptoms of a mental health condition is to take a mental health test. Mental Health America[6] offers a variety of mental health screening tools. How does it work? After completing your mental health test, you will receive information, resources, and tools to help you understand and improve your mental health.[6]

Figure 2. My Mental Health: Do I Need Help?
Source: *https://www.nimh.nih.gov/sites/default/files/images/2022_MyMentalHealth_Info.jpg*

Offered by Mental Health America, access mental health tests by clicking on *this link*:

- DEPRESSION TEST +
- POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION TEST (NEW & EXPECTING PARENTS) +
- ANXIETY TEST +
- ADHD TEST +
- BIPOLAR TEST +
- PSYCHOSIS & SCHIZOPHRENIA TEST +
- PTSD TEST +
- EATING DISORDER TEST +
- ADDICTION TEST +
- PARENT TEST: YOUR CHILD'S MENTAL HEALTH +
- YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH TEST +
- TEST DE DEPRESIÓN +
- TEST DE ANSIEDAD +
- SELF-INJURY SURVEY +

Dental Distress: Unpacking Mental Health and Well-being

Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes their abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can contribute to their community.

Dr. Martin Seligman, a leading researcher in the field of psychology, is recognized as the father of positive psychology.[7] His PERMA+ Model outlines five core elements essential for well-being and happiness:

1. **P - Positive emotions:** Practicing positive emotions (smiling, being cheerful, and happy) assists individuals with having and projecting a positive perspective.

2. **E- Engagement:** The acts of engagement entail how individuals pursue involvement in hobbies or volunteer activities, for example, interest in them to the degree of being absorbed and losing track of time in the joy of discovery or doing.

3. **R – Relationships:** Connect and deepen relationships with family members, loved ones, and friends.

4. **M – Meaning:** Find meaning and purpose in what matters to others and not yourself.

5. **A - Accomplishments:** Savor accomplishments and strive for the satisfaction of building a successful life.[7-8]

A mental illness is a condition that affects a person's thinking, feelings, behavior, or mood. When defining mental illness, the National Institute of Mental Health describes it as an individual's state of "emotional, psychological, and social well-being".[9] These conditions deeply impact day-to-day living and may affect the ability to relate to others. Mental health conditions are more common than many people realize. This is often due to discomfort and fear surrounding discussions about mental health issues. Many individuals are concerned about the stigma or negative perceptions that may result from sharing their experiences.

Mental Health by the Numbers

Nearly a billion people around the world live with a diagnosable mental disorder.[10] In the United States, mental health issues are just as pervasive. One in five (20%) American adults will experience a diagnosable mental health condition in any given year.

Figure 3. You Are Not Alone
Source: *https://www.nimh.nih.gov/sites/default/files images/2024-findhelp-x.jpg*

Over their lifetimes, 46% of U.S. adults will meet the criteria for a diagnosable mental health condition. Approximately 59.3 million people, or 23.1% of U.S. adults, live with a mental illness, with 42.5 million affected by anxiety disorders, making them among the most common mental illnesses in the country. Major depression affects 22.5 million U.S. adults, representing 8.8% of the adult population.[11] In addition, suicide is among the leading causes of death in the United States in the adult population. In 2022, 13.2 million U.S. adults experienced suicidal thoughts, which lead to increased risk of suicide, self-harm, emotional distress, mental health deterioration, impaired daily functioning, and or physical health problems.[9]

Mental Health and the Covid-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted mental health worldwide. Anxiety and depressive disorders surged by over 25% in the pandemic's first year.[4] In the United States, mental health concerns increased in the fall and early winter of 2020 but then improved by the spring of 2021.[12-13] Research continues to progress, examining the long-term effects of the pandemic and investigating whether these

initial improvements have persisted or if new mental health challenges have emerged.

Addressing Mental Health Among Dental Professionals in the United States

Much like the broader population, dental professionals have grappled with significant mental health challenges. The 2021 Dentists Well-Being Survey conducted by the American Dental Association revealed insights into the stress and depression levels among dentists. Most dentists, 63%, reported low-stress levels at home. However, work-related stress was more significant, with most dentists reporting moderate to severe stress. Severe work-related stress was notably twice as prevalent among women (21%) compared to men (12%). The results indicated that 46% of dentists were at low risk for depression, 39% at medium risk, and 15% at high risk. Dentists under the age of 40 were more likely to score medium or high risk (68%) compared to their older counterparts (48%). Similarly, female dentists had higher medium or high-risk scores (67%) than male dentists (47%). Moreover, less than half (46%) of the dentists surveyed were aware that mental health resources were available to them through state dentist well-being programs.[14]

A joint study by the American Dental Hygienists' Association and the American Dental Association examined the mental health of dental healthcare workers (DHCWs) from June 2020 to June 2021. The study included 8,902 participants who completed monthly anonymous online surveys. Findings from this study indicated that 17.7% of DHCWs reported anxiety symptoms, 10.7% reported depression symptoms, and 8.3% reported both. Throughout the study, dental hygienists consistently reported higher rates of depression than dentists, peaking in December 2020. While depression rates among dental hygienists declined in 2021, dentists' rates remained steady, resulting in similar rates for both groups by the end of the study period in June of 2021 (11.8% for dentists and 12.4% for dental hygienists).[15]

It is known that mental health disorders are not the result of one single event. Research has validated that there may be many compounding factors. One's genetic background, routine or environmental factors, or a combination of these elements may influence whether an individual develops a mental health condition. Furthermore, stress associated with the workplace, school conditions, or past traumatic events can play a role, for example, in determining the etiology of one's mental health condition.

Mental health disorders are among the leading causes of disability worldwide, including in the United States. These disorders include major depression, bipolar disorder (also known as manic depression), schizophrenia, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.[16] Among these, depression has become a major global public health issue, affecting approximately 50 million individuals worldwide.[17]

In the United States, mental health disorders are the leading cause of disease burden. Moreover, when disease burden includes both disability and death, mental health and substance use disorders become the top causes of disability-adjusted life years in the United States, along with circulatory diseases and cancer.[18]

This demonstrates the significance of psychological disorders and their consequence in the lives of average Americans. Consequently, if "left untreated or inadequately treated, mental illness has adverse personal and societal consequences that are felt directly in the workplace; in the education, welfare, and justice systems; and the nation's economy as a whole."[19]

Origins of Mental Health Challenges, Substance Use Disorders & Co-occurring Disorders

The term *mental illness* includes numerous psychiatric disorders and can widely vary in severity. Mental health researchers and professionals have advanced several theories to explain the causes of mental health and addiction problems, however, the question of what constitutes these disorders is not quite as simple to explain. Mental illness diagnoses and addiction disorders are generally categorized into a variety of subtypes with multiple specific conditions that make up each subtype. Some

major mental illness subtypes include disorders that are initially diagnosed in childhood, or early adolescence such as schizophrenia, as well as other psychotic disorders, which can significantly alter the course of a person's life. Early experiences, such as a traumatic event, or stressors that occur later in life such as the loss of a job, the birth of a child, or chronic health conditions can further a person's chances of developing psychological problems. Furthermore, other disorders such as those related to mood, anxiety, somatic problems, gender identity, eating, sleep, impulse control, and personality disorders might develop later in life, as a response to one's environment which other social factors can exacerbate.[20]

Mental health is understood as emotional, behavioral, and social maturity or normality, in the absence of mental or behavioral problems. Some believe cultural factors such as racism, discrimination, and violence may contribute to the causes of mental illness, reinforcing the idea that the environment plays a suggestive share in the development of such disorders. Patterns of illness(es) in individuals with disorders tend to have a hereditary component, thus the likelihood of being affected by disorders that are present in a person's lineage is more prevalent and therefore often out of their control.

For treatment by the psychiatric and mental health communities, there are defined criteria in the diagnosis of medically accepted mental illnesses, which are described in detail in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual of Mental Disorders.[21] The criteria described in the DSM-IV-TR form the basis for almost all mental health treatment conceptualization in the United States.

The United States is believed to have the highest incidence of people diagnosed with mental health problems (26.4%) in the developed world.[10] Mental illnesses are legitimate medical conditions, like heart disease or cancer, and thus require appropriate treatment.

Battling Dental Fatigue
Navigating Burnout in the Dental Profession

Although the concept of burnout has been widely discussed, its definition continues to evolve. Designating it a three-dimensional model, burnout includes a) chronic emotional exhaustion, b) feelings of pessimism and detachment from one's job (depersonalization), and c) feelings of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment resulting from the chronic stress of assisting others in distress (e.g., clients or patients). Although burnout differs from common mental health conditions, burnout is solely related to stressors in one's professional life, specifically seen in frontline healthcare workers and dental professionals. Moreover, it does not include suicidal ideation or feelings of hopelessness.[22,23]

Stress burnout, depression, and other conditions can have similar symptoms, including exhaustion, sleep problems, and changes in appetite. Signs of burnout[24] generally appear in key symptom areas:

- **Extreme Exhaustion:** People affected feel drained and emotionally exhausted, unable to cope, tired and down, and lacking energy. Physical symptoms include gastrointestinal (stomach or bowel) problems.
- **Alienation from (work-related) activities:** People who have burnout find their jobs increasingly stressful and frustrating. They may start being cynical about their working conditions and their colleagues. At the same time, they may increasingly distance themselves emotionally and start feeling numb about their work.
- **Reduced performance:** Burnout mainly affects everyday tasks at work, at home, or when caring for family members. People with burnout are very negative about their tasks, find it hard to concentrate, are listless, and lack creativity.
- **Sleep problems:** Insomnia or frequent nighttime awakenings.
- **Changes in appetite:** Loss of appetite or overeating

How is Burnout Diagnosed

There are a multitude of questionnaires for self-assessment when attempting to diagnose burnout, and to complicate things further there is no single definition of *burnout*. However,

there are commonly accepted signs and symptoms of this problem.

The symptoms that are said to be a result of burnout can generally also have several causes but generally result in the following noticeable changes which include:

- extreme exhaustion
- feeling down
- reduced performance at work or school
- feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
- increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and reduced professional efficacy.

One can access information and resources from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that addresses health worker burnout. (See Table 1.) Physical illnesses or certain medications can also cause similar symptoms such as exhaustion and tiredness. So, it is important to consider other possible causes first together with a doctor, before assuming *burnout* is the cause of your distress. Burnout refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life.[24]

What is the Difference Between Burnout & Depression

Certain symptoms are typical for burnout but can also occur in the DSM-V TR Manual for Depression. These symptoms include extreme exhaustion, feeling down, and reduced performance. Because the symptoms of burnout are often, at least initially, like depression, some people may be diagnosed with burnout despite experiencing clinical signs of depression. It is therefore important not to self-diagnose burnout too quickly. Doing so could lead to the wrong treatment. For instance, advising someone with depression to take a long vacation or time off work. People who are *only* exhausted because of work can recover if they follow a change in lifestyle with their employer. However, with depression, taking this type of advice may lead to further complications.

Some characteristics of burnout can be very specific, and often related to one's work environment or problems with work-life balance, where depression is a treatable chemical imbalance, with appropriate treatment and possible medication these symptoms can be elevated. Differences include low self-esteem, hopelessness, and suicidal tendencies (thinking about killing oneself). These aren't regarded as typical symptoms of burnout. People with burnout may increase the risk of someone getting depression, but these are two different diagnoses.[24]

Balancing Bite and Brain: Mental Health Care for Dental Professionals

Maintaining mental and emotional well-being is crucial for dental professionals who often face high levels of occupational stress, anxiety, and burnout. Dental care teams encounter various stressors in their daily practice, including business-related, clinical, and working environment stressors. Common stressors among practicing dental professionals include challenges in maintaining a work-life balance, dysfunctional work teams, and insufficient time in their schedules to treat patients. Additionally, dental professionals and students may face challenges such as debt, fraud, family responsibilities, illness or injuries, isolation, depression, burnout, anxiety, loss, grief, and addiction, all of which can negatively affect their mental health.

Described as a state of mental and physical exhaustion, Christina Maslach further defined burnout as a psychological syndrome and, thus, developed the constructs of mental fatigue as emotional exhaustion, negative perceptions and feelings about clients or patients (depersonalization), and negative perceptions of oneself in relation to job performance. In the context of dental professionals providing care to patients, burnout can cause individuals to feel overwhelmed by the demands of their work while feeling disconnected from various aspects of their job. Maslach and Leiter[22] proposed that increased detachment from work-related duties may lead to perceiving patients as less than human (dehumanization). This is a result of a lack of empathy, emotional detachment, and a decline in the quality of care for patients or consumers.[22]

Table 1. Let's Listen and Learn about Mental Health

Listen to YouTube Videos and Learn More about Mental Health or Mental Well-being *(To access videos and resources click the link embedded in the title)*	Highlights of videos and additional resources
Mental Health Awareness	Raising the awareness of mental health and how Able Futures can help you look after your mental health.
Health and wellbeing for dental professionals	Recognize the impact the current circumstances may be having on our own health and wellbeing so that we're able to take steps to try and prevent stress, exhaustion and burnout.
7 Questions To Ask To Check Your Mental Health – Mental Health Awareness Month	In this video, one will ask oneself seven questions to do a mental health check-in.
5 Tips To Staying Mentally Healthy	Boost your well-being and stay mentally healthy by following simple steps.
Top 10 tips to maintain your mental health	Try out the 10 tips on staying mentally healthy
8 Signs that Someone is Battling Mental Health Problems	Do you often feel detached, tired, uninterested, insomniac-like, or have hypersomnia, loss of appetite, or suicidal thoughts? Explore these signs that you or someone you know might be dealing with mental health problems.
Mental Health Minute: Depression National Institute of Mental Health	Got 60 seconds? Take a mental health minute to learn about depression.
Mental Health Minute: Anxiety Disorders in Adults National Institute of Mental Health	Got 60 seconds? Take a mental health minute to learn about anxiety disorders in adults.
Mental Health Awareness Month | Fighting the stigma surrounding getting help	May is Mental Health Awareness Month. 11Alive is working to raise awareness about trauma and the impact it can have on physical, emotional, and mental health.
U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources Health Worker Burnout	Access information, resources, videos, and graphics about "why health worker burnout matters"

Despite limited published information about burnout among U.S. dentists, LoSasso et al[25] found that 20–23% of dentists experienced work-related burnout in their study. The study also revealed that a higher percentage (almost 58%) of solo and small-group practice dentists reported feelings of job stress compared to those in larger group practices (38%).[25] Burnout has significant consequences not only for dental professionals and institutions but also for the patients receiving care.

Hence, acquiring knowledge of available resources, support networks, and mental health services for dental professionals can be achieved through various professional associations, including the American Dental Association, the British Dental Association, the Canadian Dental Association, the American Dental Hygienists' Association, and the Canadian Dental Hygienists Association. These organizations offer various mental health services, counseling, support groups, and access to online forums or communities where professionals can connect and share their personal and professional experiences. For example, The American Dental Association has launched the State Well-Being Program Directory that provides a list of state personnel contacts for each 50 US states and the District of Columbia. (See the list of Resources in this course to access this directory).

Strategies for Managing Stress, Promoting Self-Care & Maintaining Work-life Balance in the Dental Profession

How can dental professionals, professional organizations, and dental or dental hygiene schools prevent or alleviate the occupational stressors that often lead to burnout? There are various preventive strategies and interventions to address mental health challenges resulting from workplace burnout. Let's examine these approaches.

- **Continuing Education Programs:** Many dental schools and professional organizations offer continuing education programs. Such programs address mental health and wellness topics specific to dental professionals and workplace stressors. These programs may include in-person workshops, seminars, webinars, or online courses dealing with stress management, burnout prevention, self-care strategies, and accessing mental health support from mental health professionals and supportive colleagues. For example, the American Dental Hygienists' Association offers dental hygienists a professional development course titled *Mental Health & The Dental Hygienist Certification Program*.
- **Employer Resources:** Employer resources may include dental practices, higher education institutions, professional resources, and support services for the mental health and well-being of employees and students. These resources could include access to employee assistance programs (EAPs), on-site or virtual counseling services, mind-body wellness programs, and exercise programs. For example, Tufts University School of Dental Medicine provides students with mind-body practices to become "consummate professionals," assisting in improving their services to patients.[26]
- **Online Platforms and Websites:** There are several online platforms and websites dedicated to supporting the mental health and well-being of healthcare professionals, including dental professionals. Websites like Dentist's Health Support Trust (UK), Dentist Health, Wellness & Success (USA), or the Dentist Wellness Institute offer resources, articles, self-assessment tools, and links to mental health services.
- **Peer Support Networks:** Connecting with fellow dental professionals can provide valuable support and camaraderie. Consider joining, or forming, peer support groups or networks where professionals can share experiences, discuss challenges, and offer support to one another.
- **Consulting Mental Health Professionals:** Seeking guidance and counseling from mental health professionals, such as psychologists, counselors, or therapists who specialize in treating healthcare professionals, can provide personalized support and strategies for managing stress, burnout, and other mental health challenges.

- **Mental Health Hotlines and Helplines:** National, regional, and state-wide mental health hotlines and helplines provide support and guidance to individuals in distress. These services may offer free and confidential counseling, crisis intervention, and referrals to local mental health resources.

Moreover, the *National Mental Health Hotline* (n.d.) helps those who are experiencing a mental health crisis. A mental health crisis is defined as a situation when an individual is experiencing or showing emotional distress, has thoughts of harm to oneself or others, is out of touch with reality, is unable to function daily, and cannot feel a sense of calm within one's body or mind (Mental Health Hotline, n.d.). Examples of physical and or mental distress in this category may include talking about suicide without imminent danger, substance use/illicit drug use, discontinuing psychiatric medications, low mood (or depression), and eating disorders. If there is doubt that you (or a colleague) are in imminent danger or exhibiting abnormal behaviors within the dental office or in other settings, call 911 immediately.

Furthermore, the *988 Lifeline* provides individuals with free 24/7 and confidential support for those in distress. The *988 Lifeline* also provides prevention and crisis resources, including suicide prevention, and presents best practices for professionals in the United States. So, what happens when people call the *988 Lifeline*? First, callers will hear a message informing them that they have reached the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. Next, a skilled, trained crisis worker, who is employed at the *988 Lifeline* network crisis center closest to their geographic location, will answer the phone. This crisis worker will listen to callers, understand how their emotional distress (problem) is affecting them, provide support, and share resources that may be helpful. To hear the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline message via phone, access *https://988lifeline.org/talk-to-someone-now/* People can also message the Lifeline network crisis by texting 988. Additional resources such as the 988 Lifeline Options For Deaf + Hard of Hearing, a veteran's crisis line, and a Línea 988 de Prevención del Suicidio y Crisis line can be found at 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.[27]

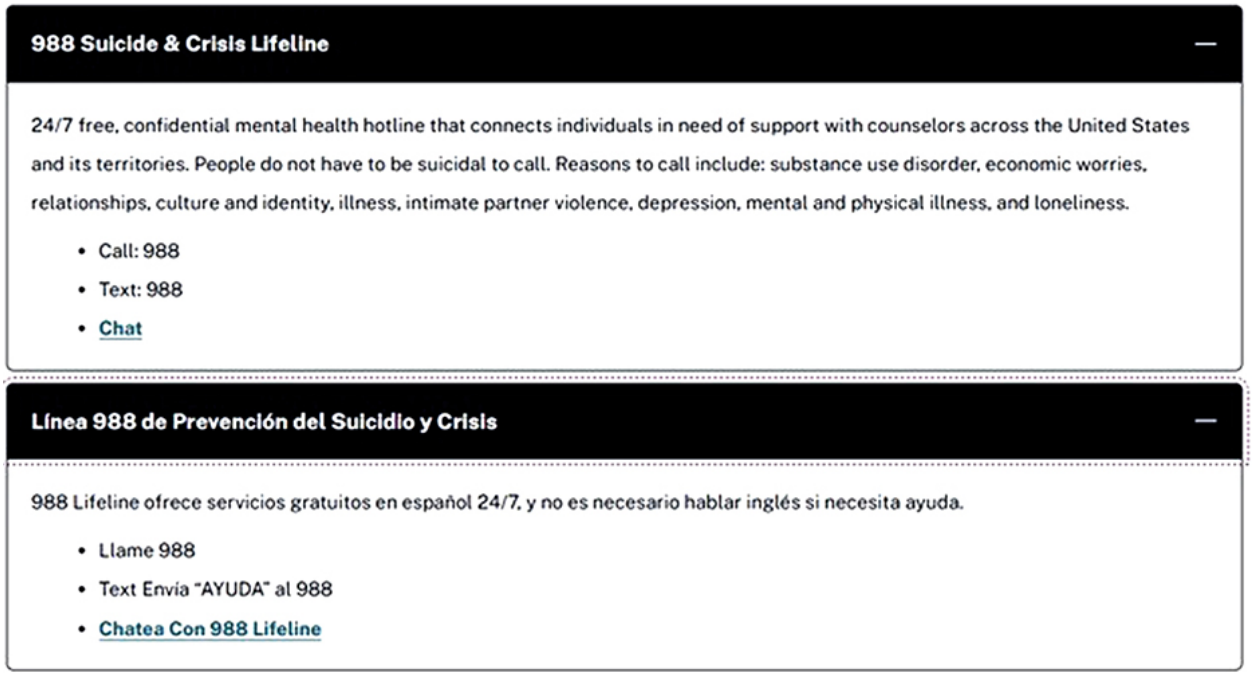

Figure 4. 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline in English and Spanish
Source: *https://988lifeline.org/get-help/*

Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-being: Five Essentials

The Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being presents *Five Essentials* that support workplaces as drivers of well-being.[28] As highlighted in the third **Essential Work-Life Harmony**, professional and personal life roles merge to create work and non-work conflicts. The ability to balance work with personal stressors reflects the human desire for autonomy and flexibility.

The key components of Work-Life Harmony include:

a) Providing more autonomy over how work is managed and performed;
b) Making work schedules as flexible and predictable as possible;
c) Increasing access to paid leave (such as sick and personal/family paid leave, and paid vacation time); and
d) Respecting.

Figure 5. Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well Being - Five Essentials
Source: *https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/priorities/workplace-well-being/index.html*

Breaking the Silence: Confronting Mental Health Stigma

Of the estimated 57.8 million adults aged 18 or older in the United States, diagnosed in 2021 with any mental illness, more than half were hesitant to seek help for their disorders.[29] Why do people refrain from or delay seeking treatment for their perceived/diagnosed mental struggles and mental illness? Among the myriad of reasons, people are concerned that they will be treated differently by others (including co-workers, family members, and loved ones), or they fear losing their jobs, thus their livelihood. "That's because stigma, prejudice and discrimination against people with mental illness are still very much a problem."[29]

There are *three types of stigmas* identified by researchers that are self-inflicted or other-inflicted:

- **Public stigma** involves discriminatory or biased attitudes people may have about mental illness.
- **Self-stigma** refers to an individual having negative attitudes and internalized shame about their condition.
- **Structural stigma** is more systemic, involving policies of government and private organizations that intentionally or unintentionally limit opportunities for people with mental illness.[29]

Because people often do not elect to seek treatment for mental health or addiction problems through a general medical office, they typically present somatic complaints such as "stress" or "fatigue." Such a complaint sounds less urgent than other types of physical matters, thus the patient leaves the doctor's office without an established psychiatric diagnosis. Masking problems with physical symptoms while leaving the underlying mental health problem unaddressed, causes the problem to get worse. In addition to these limitations, traditional medicine can be challenging for mental health patients because of the social stigmas associated with mental illness. In general, patients are reluctant to seek help this way, as the time needed to explain the nature of their emotional problems and the fear of being labeled "difficult" or "crazy" leads to the avoidance of regular annual check-ups. Subsequently, traditional medical practice is often not conducive to the treatment of these types of problems.[20]

Stigma in the Workplace

After a 2022 national survey from the American Psychiatric Association (APA), results revealed that mental health stigma "is still a major challenge" among both workers and supervisors in the workplace.[29] These challenges, as surveyed by the APA, involve workers (adults) speaking openly and honestly with their supervisors about mental health, feeling comfortable using mental health services, and worrying about possible retaliation if they took time off or sought care for their mental health. Despite the uneasiness among workers about retaliation in the workplace, the percentage has been declining since 2020.

Actions to Reduce Stigma Surrounding Mental Health and Mental Illness

How can the stigma among those who feel uncomfortable discussing and or seeking care for their mental health be addressed and accepted by their colleagues (e.g., dental professionals)? One theme emerged, those with mental health are encouraged to speak and share their lived experiences with others. This sharing of personal stories reduces stigma while emphasizing individuals with mental health issues are human beings deserving of respect. Applying this transparent and empathetic approach aligns with the expected behaviors and practice of the five fundamental principles of the foundation of the American Dental Association and the American Dental Hygienists' Association Code of Ethics--patient autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, and veracity. Hence, let's tackle and change the narrative together: let's destigmatize perceptions about mental health, and let's bring hope and healing to people with mental illness all over the United States.

Proposed by the Stop Stigma Together organization, they urge us to listen to the voices and personal stories of people with mental health conditions, support funding for new research, bring key stakeholders to share best practices, facilitate meaningful conversations, and engage in advocacy and policy change.[30]

Have You Thought About Polishing Your Mind: Mindfulness Strategies For Self-care and Work-Life Balance?

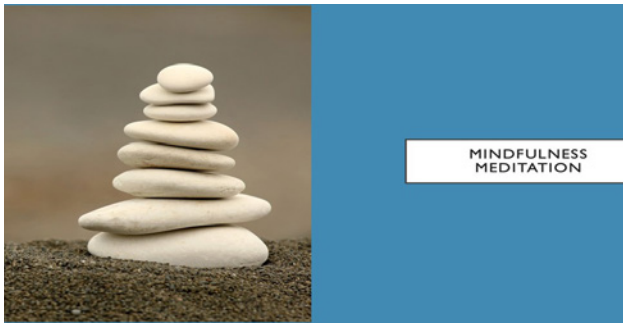

Figure 6. Mindful Meditation

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness meditation is a mental training practice that teaches you to slow down racing thoughts, let go of negativity, and calm both your mind and body. Mindfulness techniques can vary, but in general, mindfulness meditation involves breathing practice, mental imagery, awareness of body and mind, and muscle and body relaxation. The historical background to this popular form of meditation, and the science supporting this method practice demonstrates the benefits.

Mindfulness-based therapies (MBTs) have shown promising results in non-psychotic disorders. Unlike most other psychotherapy models, which are claimed to be Western in origin, MBTs are firmly based on Indian philosophy and traditions.[31] Modern-day practitioners such as Jon Kabat-Zinn popularized this meditation practice through a movement and have gained worldwide notoriety in bringing the everyday practice of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) training to the public. Mindful practice techniques include: mindful breathing, mindful observation, mindful awareness, mindful listening, mindful immersion, and mindful appreciation.

Hence, science supports the idea that in times of uncertainty, mindfulness techniques can be an extremely helpful method to gain perspective and restore balance in one's life.

Strategies: Mindfulness Exercises

Let's get started ...

1. Mindful Breathing

This exercise can be done standing up or sitting down, and pretty much anywhere at any time. All you must do is be still and focus on your breath for just one minute.

1. Start by breathing in and out slowly. One breath cycle should last for approximately 6 seconds.
2. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, letting your breath flow effortlessly in and out of your body.
3. Let go of your thoughts. Let go of things you must do later today or pending projects that need your attention. Simply let thoughts rise and fall of their own accord and be at one with your breath.
4. Purposefully watch your breath, focusing your sense of awareness on its pathway as it enters your body and fills you with life.
5. Then watch with awareness as it works its way up and out of your mouth and its energy dissipates into the world.

If you are someone who thought they'd never be able to meditate, guess what? You are halfway there already!

If you enjoyed one minute of this mind-calming exercise, why not try two or three.

2. Mindful Observation

This exercise is simple but incredibly powerful because it helps you notice and appreciate seemingly simple elements of your environment more profoundly.

The exercise is designed to connect us with the beauty of the natural environment, something that is easily missed when we are rushing around in the car or hopping on and off trains on the way to work.

1. Choose a natural object from within your immediate environment and focus on watching it for a minute or two. This could be a flower or an insect, or even the clouds or the moon.
2. Don't do anything except notice the thing you are looking at. Simply relax into watching for as long as your concentration allows.
3. Look at this object as if you are seeing it for the first time.
4. Visually explore every aspect of its formation and allow yourself to be consumed by its presence.
5. Allow yourself to connect with its energy and its purpose within the natural world.

2. Mindful Awareness

This exercise is designed to cultivate a heightened awareness and appreciation of simple daily tasks and the results they achieve.

Think of something that happens every day more than once; something you take for granted, like opening a door, for example.

At the very moment you touch the doorknob to open the door, stop for a moment and be mindful of where you are, how you feel in that moment, and where the door will lead you.

Similarly, the moment you open your computer to start work, take a moment to appreciate the hands that enable this process and the brain that facilitates your understanding of how to use the computer.

Figure 7. Mindful Breathing

Figure 8. Mindful Observation

These *touch point* cues don't have to be physical ones.

For example: Each time you think of a negative thought, you might choose to take a moment to stop, label the thought as unhelpful, and release the negativity.

Or, perhaps each time you smell food, you take a moment to stop and appreciate how lucky you are to have good food to eat and share with your family and friends.

Choose a touch point that resonates with you today and, instead of going through your daily motions on autopilot, take occasional moments to stop and cultivate purposeful awareness of what you are doing and the blessings these actions bring to your life.

4. Mindful Listening

This exercise is designed to open your ears to sound in a non-judgmental way, and indeed to train your mind to be less swayed by the influence of past experiences and preconceptions.

So much of what we feel is influenced by past experience. For example, we may dislike a song because it reminds us of a breakup or another period of life when things felt negative.

The idea of this exercise is to listen to some music from a neutral standpoint, with a present awareness that is unhindered by preconception.

Select a piece of music you have never heard before. You may have something in your collection that you have never listened to, or you might choose to turn the radio dial until something catches your ear.

1. Close your eyes and put on your headphones.
2. Try not to get drawn into judging the music by its genre, title, or artist name before it has begun. Instead, ignore any labels and neutrally allow yourself to get lost in the journey of sound for the duration of the song.

Figure 9. Mindful Awareness

Figure 10. Mindful Listening

3. Allow yourself to explore every aspect of the track. Even if the music isn't to your liking at first, let go of your dislike and give your awareness full permission to climb inside the track and dance among the sound waves.
4. Explore the song by listening to the dynamics of each instrument. Separate each sound in your mind and analyze each one by one.
5. Focus on the vocals…the sound of the voice, its range, and tones. If there is more than one voice, separate them as you did in step 4.

The idea is to listen intently, to become fully entwined with the composition without preconception or judgment of the genre, artist, lyrics, or instrumentation. Don't think; hear.

5. Mindful Immersion
This exercise intends to cultivate contentment in the moment and escape the persistent striving we engage in daily.

Rather than anxiously wanting to finish an everyday routine task to get on with doing something else, take that routine and fully experience it like never before.

For example, if you are cleaning your house, pay attention to every detail of the activity.

Rather than treat this as a regular chore, create an entirely new experience by noticing every aspect of your actions:

- Feel and become the motion when sweeping the floor, sense the muscles you use when scrubbing the dishes, and develop a more efficient way of wiping the windows clean.

The idea is to get creative and discover new experiences within a familiar routine task.

Instead of laboring through and constantly thinking about finishing the task, become aware of every step and fully immerse yourself in the progress. Take the activity beyond a routine by aligning yourself with it physically, mentally, and spiritually.

Who knows, you might even enjoy cleaning for once!

6. Mindful Appreciation
In this last exercise, you must notice five things in your day that usually go unappreciated.

These things can be objects or people; it's up to you. Use a notepad to check off 5 by the end of the day.

The point of this exercise is to simply give thanks and appreciate the seemingly insignificant things in life, the things that support our existence but rarely get a second thought amidst our desire for bigger and better things.

For example, electricity powers your kettle, the postman delivers your mail, your clothes

Figure 11. Mindful Immersion

Figure 12. Mindful Appreciation

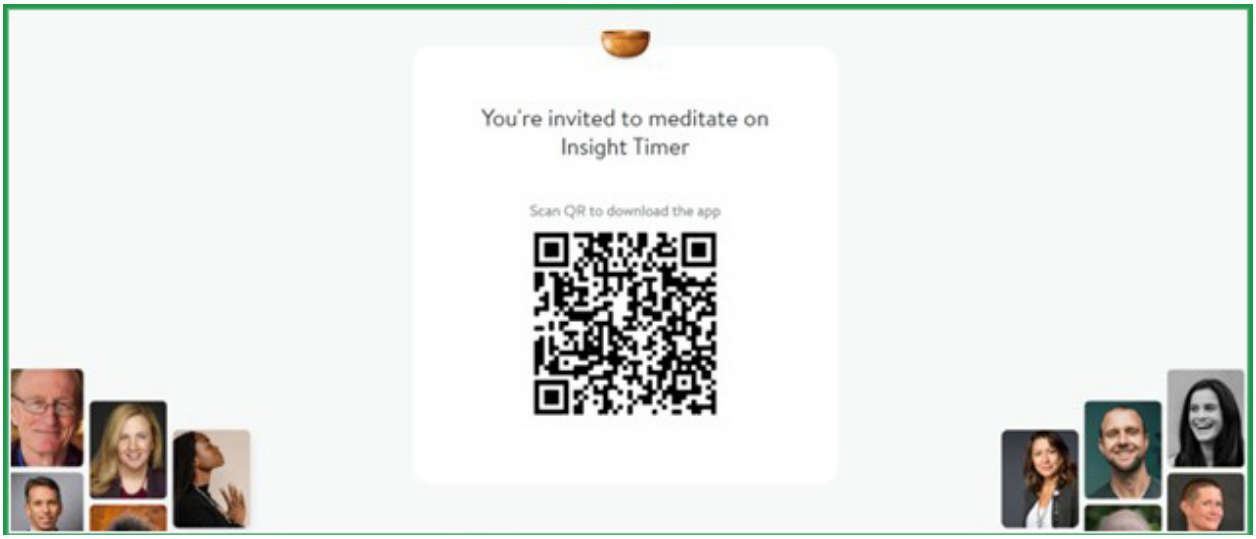

Figure 13. Insight Timer-Meditate & Sleep App

provide you warmth, your nose lets you smell the flowers in the park, and your ears let you hear the birds in the tree by the bus stop, but...

- Do you know how these things/processes came to exist, or how they work?
- Have you ever properly acknowledged how these things benefit your life and the lives of others?
- Have you ever thought about what life might be like without these things?
- Have you ever stopped to notice their finer, more intricate details?
- Have you ever sat down and thought about relationships?

Once you have identified your 5 things, make it your duty to find out everything you can about their creation and purpose to truly appreciate how they support your life.

Access the **Insight Timer-Meditate & Sleep App** by the QR code that will guide you through mindful meditation activities.[32]

Conclusion

After completing this course and recognizing the significance of mental health and well-being, take a moment to reflect on your mental health awareness and consider how you can implement strategies for achieving optimal mental health. Through increased self-awareness, one can consider continuing conversations about mental health to foster a supportive work environment and maintain a healthy work-life balance. We encourage you to engage in open communication with colleagues and others about mental health to enhance both your professional and personal lives.

Figure 14. Quote by Elenor Brown

Course Test Preview

To receive Continuing Education credit for this course, you must complete the online test. Please go to: *www.dentalcare.com/en-us/ce-courses/ce687/start-test*

1. What are the occupational stressors faced by dental professionals that contribute to mental health challenges such as burnout?

A. Inadequate work-life balance
B. Work schedules that do not accommodate the treatment of patients
C. Autonomy in the workplace
D. Dysfunctional dental teams
E. A, B, and D apply

2. Which of the following is NOT a preventive strategy or intervention commonly employed by dental professionals to mitigate mental health issues caused by workplace burnout?

A. Attend continuing education programs that cover mental health and wellness topics, including stress management and burnout prevention.
B. Engage in mind-body wellness programs to support one's mental health.
C. Seek online platforms and websites dedicated to healthcare professionals' mental well-being, such as Dentist's Health Support Trust or Dentist Wellness Institute, which can offer valuable resources and support.
D. Consult mental health professionals, specializing in treating healthcare providers, can provide tailored strategies and counseling to effectively manage stress and burnout.
E. Drinking alcoholic beverages with colleagues

3. What is the estimated percentage of American adults who experience a diagnosable mental health condition each year?

A. 10% (one in 10)
B. 20% (one in five)
C. 30% (three in 10)
D. 40% (four in 10)

4. What condition is characterized by feelings of apprehension or unexplained thoughts of impending doom?

A. Anxiety
B. Depersonalization
C. Severe Mental Illness
D. Stress

5. _____ _____ is a state of well-being in which the individual realizes their abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can contribute to his or her community.

A. Mental Illness
B. Self Care
C. Behavioral Health
D. Mental Health

6. When considering disease burden, mental health and substance use disorders emerge as the leading causes of disability-adjusted life years in the United States, alongside circulatory diseases (such as heart disease and stroke) and cancer.

A. True
B. False

7. Which type of stigma includes institutional policies and practices that limit opportunities for individuals with mental illnesses?

A. Mental Illness-related Stigma
B. Public Stigma
C. Self-Stigma
D. Structural Stigma

8. What is the approximate number of U.S. adults who experienced suicidal thoughts in 2022?

A. Less than 1 million
B. Around 5 million
C. Around 13 million
D. More than 20 million

9. Which symptom is NOT associated with burnout?

A. Exhaustion
B. Alienation from (work-related) activities
C. Reduced performance: Burnout mainly affects everyday tasks at work, at home, or when caring for family members.
D. Compulsive hand washing
E. Changes in appetite: Loss of appetite or overeating

10. Which fact about mental health is NOT true?

A. 1 in 5 U.S. adults experience mental illness each year.
B. 1 in 20 U.S. adults experience serious illness mental illness each year.
C. 1 in 6 U.S. youth aged 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year.
D. We know mental health conditions are the result of one single event.

11. Because the symptoms of burnout and depression are initially similar, it is important to self-diagnose burnout and avoid seeking professional help.

A. True
B. False

12. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) is a mental training practice that teaches you to slow down racing thoughts, let go of negativity, and calm both your mind and body. Which of the following is NOT a strategy used to help with these issues?

A. Mindful Breathing
B. Mindful Observation
C. Compulsive thinking
D. Mindful Listening

13. Case Scenario : Dr. Smith, a dentist with a successful practice, has been experiencing chronic exhaustion, irritability, and a sense of detachment from work. Despite long hours in the dental office and high patient demands, she struggles to maintain a healthy work-life balance. This imbalance has started to negatively impact her personal and collegial relationships, including her overall well-being.

Chronic exhaustion, irritability, and a sense of detachment from work may indicate that Dr. Smith is suffering from which of the following?

A. Depression
B. Burnout
C. Anxiety disorder
D. Sleep apnea
E. Suicidal ideation

14. Case Scenario : Dr. Johnson, a talented and ambitious dentist, experiences heightened anxiety before performing complex procedures. The fear of making mistakes or being judged by colleagues and patients leads to persistent self-doubt and a decline in confidence. He experiences physical symptoms such as tachycardia, profuse perspiration in his hands, and trembling hands, which can make it challenging to perform delicate procedures with precision. Moreover, his thoughts become consumed with worst-case scenarios, causing distraction and difficulty focusing during treatments.

Recognizing the detrimental effects of his anxiety on his dental practice and well-being, Dr. Johnson seeks support and strategies to manage his symptoms. In search of guidance and collegial support tailored to dental professionals, Dr. Johnson seeks help through his professional dental association.

Select the resource that best provides Dr. Johnson with peer assistance.

A. The Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well Being
B. 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline
C. American Academy of Addiction Psychiatry
D. American Dental Association State Well-Being Program Directory
E. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

15. Case Scenario : Dr. Lee, a recent graduate dentist, experienced symptoms of stress and anxiety while studying in dental school but hesitates to continue their practice of mind-body wellness programs. They are fearful that their new dentist colleagues will judge them.

This case scenario highlights which specific term(s) this dentist is internally struggling with concerning mental well-being.

A. Addiction
B. Mental illness
C. Stigma
D. Discrimination
E. Illness Self-Management

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Additional Resources

- American Dental Association. Wellness.
- American Dental Hygienists' Association. American Dental Hygienists' Association Mental Health & The Dental Hygienist Certification Program.
- Canadian Dental Hygienists Association. Member & Family Assistance Program.
- CDHA Psychological Wellbeing
- Jon Kabat-Zinn. Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life.
- Mental Health America. Where To Start. 2024 Outreach Tool Kit.
- Mental health information. Statistics. Suicide.
- National Academy of Medicine. Action collaborative on clinician well-being and resilience.
- NationalMentalHealthHotline.org. National mental health hotline. Free & confidential 24/7 assistance.

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Dr. Sandra D'Amato-Palumbo has been a (tenured) professor at the University of New Haven since 1997, where she plays a key role in teaching in the undergraduate dental hygiene and Doctor of Health Sciences programs. She earned an undergraduate degree at the University of Bridgeport, a master's degree at Quinnipiac University, and a doctoral degree at A.T. Still University.

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Dr. Petitti holds a Doctorate in Public and Urban Policy from the Milano School of International Affairs, Management and Urban Policy (New York, NY), a master's degree in clinical social work from Columbia University, and Public Policy from the New School for Social Research. Dr. Petitti received her clinical training as a psychotherapist through the Yale School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry, and has been a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in the State of Connecticut since 1993.

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With over 25 years of experience in dental hygiene encompassing clinical practice, education, research, and administrative roles, Prof. Pieren brings a wealth of knowledge and expertise to her professional endeavors. She has taught all levels of clinical dental hygiene and a wide range of courses across the curriculum and has held numerous leadership, peer review, and committee positions in professional organizations. Prof. Pieren is a member of the American Dental Hygienists' Association, the American Dental Education Association, the International Federation of Dental Hygienists, and Sigma Phi Alpha Dental Hygiene Honor Society.

Prof. Pieren is a faculty expert and presenter for the American Dental Hygienists' Association National Board Review and presents courses at national, regional, and local events. She has received YSU's Teaching Excellence Award and YSU's Bitonte Health and Human Services Alumni of the Year Award. Prof. Pieren is co-editor of the textbook Darby and Walsh Dental Hygiene: Theory and Practice (5th and 6th editions) and is also a Professional Fellow of the American Dental Hygienists' Association..

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