

MENTAL HEALTH: Our search for balance

PART 3: WORKPLACE CAN BE ENGINE FOR WELL-BEING

By Joanna Brown

LEADERS OF GREAT TEAMS KNOW THAT THE WHOLE IS GREATER THAN the sum of its parts – that skilled and motivated staff members working together can make magic happen in the workplace.

Likewise, great leaders recognize that when any member of the staff is struggling with personal issues, their pain reverberates throughout the office. Something just feels off.

We always hope that those struggles are short-lived, and that the team's chemistry can return to normal quickly. But sometimes it doesn't. When one team member struggles with chronic stress, depression or another mental illness, the business of dentistry is made more difficult.

U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy explained, "The link between our work and our health has become even more evident. . . (W)hen the mental health of workers suffers, so does workplace productivity, creativity and retention."

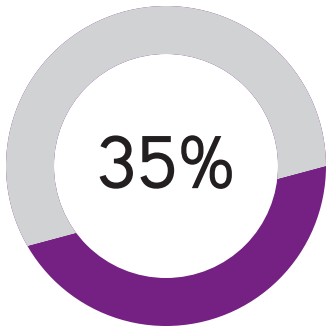
on.cds.org/HHS

As our collective awareness of mental health and wellness grows, so does our understanding of the interplay between mental health and the workplace, where your mindset affects your attention to detail, your creativity, and your compassion for the people around you. Dentists and their teams must be a part of the conversation. The ADA's 2021 Dentist Health and Well-Being Survey found that 16% of dentists experienced anxiety and 13% experienced depression. In 2024, the CDS Review will explore with experts the issues around mental health: its effects, its treatments, and the available resources for support. Watch for the September/October issue, when reporter Joanna Brown revisits this important issue.

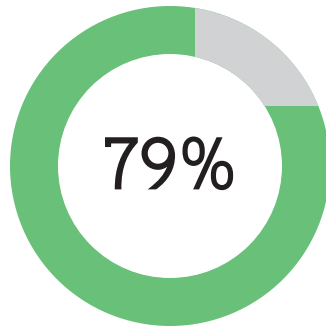
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MENTAL HEALTH POLL

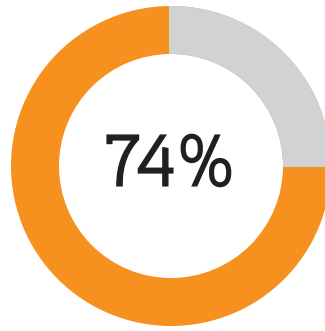
*Polling conducted April 18-22, 2024, by nonprofit Mindshare Partners with The Harris Poll.



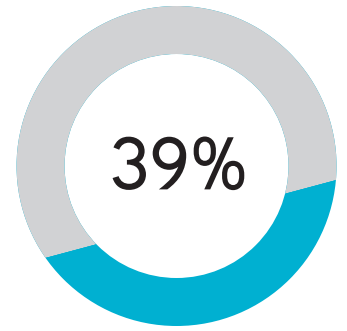
Said stress about their mental health impacts their ability to do their work.



Said actions taken by their employers to show they care about employees' mental well-being make their work experience better.



Agree that their employers care about their mental health.



Feel anxious at work about not connecting personally with their colleagues.

PROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCE

A negative mindset affects the part of the brain that processes visual information, as well as “attentional control” – the ability to focus and direct attention. In the operatory, this translates to reduced empathy for patients, errors in diagnosis, decreased productivity, and an overall lessening of the patient experience. on.cds.org/mindset

It can hurt your business. A 2018 analysis estimated the cost of job stress nationwide may be as much as \$187 billion, with 70-90% of those losses resulting from declines in productivity. on.cds.org/jobstress

A study of workers in the United Kingdom found similarly startling losses: UK employers lost nearly 50 days of work per employee in 2023 because of poor physical and mental health. It's not that employees were allowed 50 days off. Rather, for most of those 50 days employees were at the office but not very productive – a situation known as “presenteeism.” on.cds.org/presenteeism

The U.S. Surgeon General's 2022 Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being reports, “While many challenges outside the workplace may impact well-being. . . there are still many ways that organizations can function as engines for mental health and well-being.”

OFFICE CULTURE

Good leaders create compassion-filled work environments in which team members feel safe to seek out self-care without interrupting the practice of dentistry, and patients remain secure in the quality of care they receive.

“When our employers care about us, it's really meaningful,” said licensed clinical social worker Lynn Zakeri, who has more than 15 years of private practice experience in Northfield and Skokie. “Remember that everyone has their stuff that they're carrying, and we need to approach each other with compassion

and curiosity for how that's playing out.” A 2022 survey by the American Psychological Association found that 7 in 10 workers believe their employer is more concerned about the mental health of employees now than in the past. Looking ahead, 8 in 10 workers said they will look for workplaces that support mental health when they seek future job opportunities. on.cds.org/mentalhealthsupport

Story continues on following page

Support for mental health important to job seekers

In a 2022 survey by the American Psychological Association, a whopping 81% of respondents said that employers' support for mental health will be an important consideration when they look for work in the future, and 30% of workers strongly agreed that employer support for mental health will factor into their future job decisions. on.cds.org/mentalhealthsupport

But how will new dentists recognize the workplace that meets their need?

Two University of Illinois Chicago dental students offered their views.

“It'll be where someone asks, ‘How are you doing?’ and makes sure we're all comfortable and is open-minded to a diversity of backgrounds,” Noah Mesa said. “It's feeling confident about myself in the workplace. That there is personal time to relax. I want to speak highly of the office where I work, even after I leave.”

Added Shahd Louaibi, “I want to know, how will you support me? It's not just about career development, but also about mentorship and the guidance they offer. It's not just about production. It goes beyond patient care.”

The Resilience Center at the University of Illinois Chicago College of Dentistry is actively developing such an environment for students and staff – one that promotes physical and mental health, social support networks, and community engagement.

on.cds.org/mentalhealthsupport

As first-year students, Shahd Louaibi, who grew up in Schaumburg, and Noah Mesa, who came to UIC from Rockford, noticed small gestures the Resilience Center Ambassadors organized, like snacks during exams and panels of upperclassmen to field questions from the first-year students.

Now a D4, Ms. Louaibi and Mr. Mesa, a D3 student, have become ambassadors who organize photo contests and other brain breaks that bring members of the campus community together.

“You catch yourself going 100 miles an hour for seven days straight. My main goal is just to help people relax and unplug at lunchtime,” said Mr. Mesa.

In the workplace, social events that strengthen bonds among coworkers can be inexpensive and low risk. Meet up for appetizers in the evening or ask the yoga studio down the block to lead a few minutes of stretching at lunchtime.

Ms. Zakeri flipped through a photo album of such experiences the last time she waited in her dentist’s reception area. “It was all the people I recognized from the office smiling and laughing. And, as a patient, I felt really good about that.”

SAFE SPACES

The goal is leading these events is to create an office in which staff members feel

Create a positive workplace

With a renewed focus on the importance of mental health among dental professionals, many practices are responding in creative ways. Software Company HR for Health reported in May 2023 on.cds.org/hr4health that “many dental practices are now focusing on creating a positive work environment that promotes mental wellness” including:

- Providing access to counseling and therapy
- Encouraging team-building and social events to promote a sense of belonging
- Offering flexible work schedules
- Encouraging continuing education
- Promoting self-care practices, like exercise and meditation to reduce stress
- Scheduling regular check-ins between supervisors and staff to address ongoing concerns and challenges as a team

The Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce similarly recommended to its members, “Urge employees to take meaningful breaks so they can get outside to get some sunlight and fresh air. People do better when they remember there’s a big, beautiful world out there, and their work is just part of who they are.”

on.cds.org/chamber

safe sharing their struggles with you when necessary.

“Nobody wants to disclose when they feel embarrassed or ashamed,” Ms. Zakeri said. “And to disclose those things to a boss who has power over you takes a lot of trust. In that situation, you need to know that you’re talking to a safe audience.”

When a staff member initiates such a conversation with you, remind them that you hired them for their talents and skills. “Approach it from a position of strength, and together look back and ask, ‘How do we get back to how you were back then?’” Ms. Zakeri advised. “We can all handle distress if the person going

through it sounds like they’re on top of it in a problem-solving way. You want to hear that they’re on top of it.

“And when it’s the doctor who is going through something, say to the staff, ‘I’m going to be ok.’ If you’re taking time off, tell them that this is why,” Ms. Zakeri continued. “Share as much as you want, as long as you also share your plan of action for how you will be caring for yourself.

“There is a fine line between hearing resentment for not doing your job and hearing compassion because you all trust that this is not a season but just something that is happening right now.” ■



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