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## The New Professional: Prioritize Self-Care to Avoid Burnout

Amrita Patel DDS

General Practice, New York City, amripatel@nyu.edu

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By Amrita Patel, DDS

# Self-Care Strategies to Help You Avoid Burnout

**H**ave you ever gotten to the end of your day, and realized that you have no idea where the time went? Suddenly, it's 5 p.m., you got to the office at 8 a.m., and now it's dark outside? It can be incredibly frustrating when you realize you've spent eight to 10 hours working without really accomplishing much!

I can remember many times where I got to the end of my week, and all seven days felt that way. Even worse, the exhaustion and tiredness and lack of sleep made me feel totally out of sorts, and sometimes even incapable of committing myself to pushing through. What was going on?

It took a lot of introspection and self-reflection to realize that I was simply burning out. And worse, I was wearing my burnout like some badge of honor! I rationalized it by telling myself that everyone was in the same boat as I was, that being tired was just a consequence of what we do every day, and that I always needed to make sure I was doing as much, if not more, than anyone around me.

Finally, I had to just stop and take time for myself. I used that experience to develop some strategies to mitigate those feelings, because they do creep up again from time to time. The first and most important strategy for me is self-care. Self-care is not selfish, and it can look different depending on who you are, or what you need. Running a few miles in the morning outdoors is not my idea of self-care, but attending a group gym class with my husband is. We use this as time to motivate each other, but also to get some movement in before beginning our clinical days. Meal prepping and mapping out what we are eating is another focus point of mine. Cultivating those healthy eating habits has been an uphill battle for me. I am the daughter of an endodontist and wasn't always allowed to have sweet snacks growing up, so my sweet tooth can get the best of me if I'm not careful!

Quieting my racing mind is difficult, but the practice of Pilates is a great balance between active movement and peaceful mindfulness. Find what works for you and enjoy it as often as you can. As doctors, we often have a hard time

saying no. I know that I do. Set clear boundaries between work and personal life to prevent burnout from encroaching into your downtime. Define specific working hours, and resist the temptation to constantly check emails or take work-related calls outside of designated times. My phone goes on sleep mode at 9 p.m. — way earlier than I ever went to bed before — and I find that I am consistently hitting my sleep goals this way. Make sure you communicate these boundaries effectively with team members and colleagues, as well.

I always thought that I needed to be the one who did it all, all the time. Learning to delegate tasks that don't require my direct involvement was huge in managing my own stress. The Eisenhower Model of time management is one that I often refer to when I give lectures on this very topic. It's a useful tool that has helped me immensely. Check it out.

Lastly, seeking help is not a sign of weakness. Our profession can be extremely isolating, even though we are surrounded by people all the time. Cultivate a support system around you of friends, colleagues, family members, and mentors who understand your challenges and can be present for you. Organized dentistry is where I've found so many of my most treasured friends — even my husband.

In conclusion, managing all these feelings requires a proactive approach that prioritizes self-care, boundary-setting, delegation, and support networks. By implementing some simple strategies, we can safeguard our well-being, enhance professional satisfaction, and deliver high-quality patient care without succumbing to the detrimental effects of burnout. Remember, prioritizing your own health and happiness is not only essential for personal fulfillment but also vital for sustaining a successful and happy career. ●

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*The New Professional will appear each month in the MDA Journal. For more on Dr. Patel, see the news article on Page 12 of this issue. If you have suggestions for future columns, email MDA Journal Managing Editor Dave Foe at [dfoe@michigandental.org](mailto:dfoe@michigandental.org).*