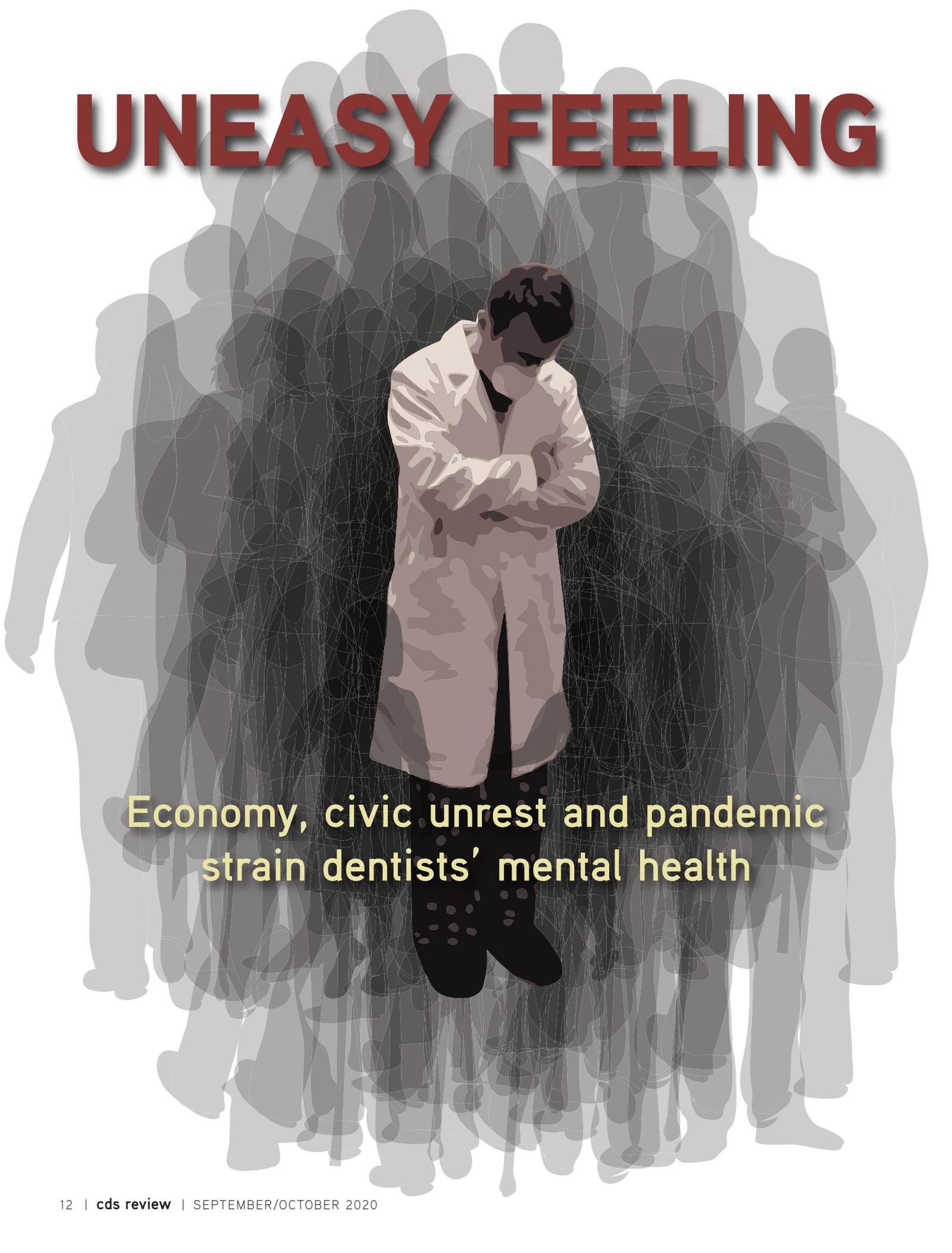


UNEASY FEELING



Economy, civic unrest and pandemic strain dentists' mental health

A year ago, the World Health Organization designated professional burn-out as a medical diagnosis; health care professionals are especially vulnerable.

by Joseph DeRosier

THE DENTAL PROFESSION CAN BE STRESSFUL EVEN DURING NORMAL TIMES. And these days are far from normal. The coronavirus pandemic is causing business disruption and associated economic woes and is forcing changes in safety precautions and practice procedures. Top that off with social and political unrest.

It all adds up to stress.

The negative impact that stress can deliver has been evident to Robert Uhland, who recently sold his dental practice but still works as an associate part-time. He also has run a successful dental practice broker company and said he has seen the strain's effect first-hand on fellow dentists.

"I think the stress levels are incredibly high, especially for solo practitioners. There are so many areas that affect you, and there is only one person dealing with that," Dr. Uhland said.

He said at the start of the pandemic, dentists were struggling to figure out the mechanics of getting loans, acquiring personal protective equipment all while being shut down and not receiving revenue.

"It's been very difficult. My hat's off to my colleagues who are trying to navigate these waters," he said.

As a practice broker Dr. Uhland said he has encountered dentists who are having trouble dealing with the stress from a physical standpoint.

"I've seen doctors who have had a lot of problems with weight loss, hypertension and migraine headaches," Dr. Uhland said.

He said some are realizing that they don't enjoy the "new reality" of dentistry that includes added infection control and technical demands that may exceed their skill set.

"It's oftentimes something that has been in their mind, but the crisis pushed them over the edge," he said of those

deciding to transition out of practice. "In a way I think it is beneficial for those people to realize it is just not something they want to continue to do, and I help them move forward rather than stay on in a very difficult situation."

Dr. Uhland said, however, the situation has been a boon to dentists who have regained an appreciation for the time they were able to spend at home with family.

Uche Odiatu is a practicing dentist from Toronto who is, among other things, a certified trainer and lifestyle coach, yoga teacher and member of the American College of Sports Medicine. He said the angst of not earning any income during the shutdown in the pandemic's early days, as well as added PPE requirements, has increased the stress level for a profession that is already stressful.

"Anthropologists have shown that a big part of us being social creatures is that we look at the whole face," he said. "And now all we have to go by are some sounds and our eyes, while a big part of emotional intelligence and communication is by language."

He said wearing a mask and face shield mean dental professionals have to strain to talk. The big puffy gown, face shield and mask mean the subtle muscle movements that send messages are hidden. And to compensate the dentist might strain the voice to be understood.

"After up to nine hours of straining your voice, you go home with a little bit of adrenal fatigue," Dr. Odiatu explained. "Anytime you have a background of angst or stress, (the level of) cortisol is raised, which is an emergency hormone, and is meant to be released for two to three minutes during a time of fight or flight."

An extended stress level takes a toll, he said, and dentists can feel the impact through added fatigue.

"Wound healing gets postponed, because as the body is undergoing the emotion of fight or flight, the last thing it wants to do is digest a meal or protect you from illness because all hands are on deck with the fight or fleeing that is taking place," he said.

That means that despite all of the protective equipment, dental professionals are still left vulnerable to health issues when stress lasts for weeks at a time. The build-up can lead to illness susceptibility, digestion problems, anxiety, sleep issues and even weight gain.

Plus, the accumulative effect could mean problems down the road.

"Our brains love to solve problems," Dr. Odiatu explained. "Any time we're stressed the brain is actively looking to solve the problem, and the brain hates to have unfinished business. We have all these loose ends about financial business, will there be a second wave (of the virus), what are the COVID-19 death numbers going to be in my state, is the patient telling the truth (about their virus exposure). . . what happens is the brain takes energy from the rest of the body's physiology to work."

Even though the brain only weighs about 3 pounds, it normally uses about 25% of the oxygen a person takes in, he said. But with stress, the brain needs even more energy so it starts taking oxygen, calories and energy from other functions.

That's why when people are upset they are more likely to have indigestion, acid reflux and other intestinal issues, he said.

And that means even eating a balanced diet may not be effective to keeping healthy, which leads to accelerated aging.

"Aches and pains will stay longer, there will be chronic inflammation," Dr. Odiatu said.

The concept of gaining those

Stress impact acutely felt by dental community

Dentists are especially vulnerable to feeling stress because of the nature of their job and their training, said one stress expert.

Tom Youngholm has spoken to a number of dental organizations about stress management and has first-hand experience with earth-shattering change.

Mr. Youngholm supports the concept of having balance in one's life in order to counteract the pervasive challenges everyone encounters.

"There are different types of change that happen in life. One of them is called an 'earthquake moment,'" he explained.

"I believe what has happened to the world right now is an 'earthquake moment' where you thought everything was OK in your life, you were making so much money and you were doing a particular job and now things are thrown up in the air and the very foundation of what you were doing and who you thought you were are in flux," Mr. Youngholm said.

"We're still in the shock phase, and we don't know how it will end. There will be a lot more tremors," he said.

He added there will be more consequences ahead, and when people don't know what will happen, it leads to stress.

Humans like to be in control, he said, and some people like to be in control more than others, people he calls perfectionists.

Many dentists fall into that category because they are taught to strive for perfection in their work, he said.

That characteristic, however, can lead to stress.

"When things like this happen, and they feel like they have to be in control all the time, something like this is even more impactful to them," he said.

He said upheaval might lead people to ask, "Who am I?"

"I don't think most people have thought about that, and if you haven't thought about it and don't have an answer to that, when things shake beneath your feet, you have no internal direction to follow," he said.

Having that balance will pay off if major changes need to be made, he said, allowing individuals to accept alternatives to the present situation.

"Everything changes: one of the key things in terms of stress management is that when things change, you have to adapt to it," he said.

Control is the biggest issue with stress management, he added.

PEOPLE WANT CONTROL

"There are four aspects of who we are," he said. "I call them 'pies', the physical, the intellectual, the emotional and the spiritual. You have to make sure that each of those aspects is in balance."

BALANCE MAKES CHANGE EASIER TO ACCEPT

"It is times like this that provide an opportunity to look at things differently and make big changes and not just surface changes," he said.

Organizations such as the Chicago Dental Society offer an opportunity for dentists to come together and attack the challenges from a collective approach rather than from an individual aspect, leading to less stress, he observed.

"If the mindset is now the competition is even tougher and it's me against all these other dentists – and I need to find a way to take as much business away from everyone else – then it is going to be stressful, not just for that particular dentist but for the whole society of dentists," he said.

But if the dental community comes together and works to make the entire group successful there doesn't need to be an "us vs. them" mentality.

And then good things can emerge, he said.

"COVID 15 pounds" during the pandemic is a real thing, but not because of a poor diet or lack of exercise.

"When we are upset, digestion slows down, and now food takes longer to go through the system and guess what happens then, the body is better able to absorb calories. . . and that's why many people gain weight with stress, because food stays longer in the GI tract and you are absorbing more calories from the food, so you get weight gain," Dr. Odiatu said.

There are ways to fight back.

One thing not to do is attempt to "buy" your way to feeling better, he said. There is a reason delivery trucks are lined on streets, and it isn't just people avoiding stores. People are making purchases to make themselves feel better. The same goes with using food as stress relief.

Instead, exercise such as walking, lifting weights or doing yoga or tai chi will be helpful.

Doing a gentle restorative exercise is best so strenuous exercise is not needed. "Less is more," he said.

Paying attention to your breathing is also helpful, he said, and taking slow breaths inhaling through the nose and letting out through the mouth has a calming effect.

Besides the physical component of stress, there is a mental aspect.

Bruce Christopher, a licensed psychologist and speaker who uses humor to get through to audiences, said he's seeing a type of burn-out on both a psychological and professional level.

A year ago, the World Health Organization designated professional burn-out as a medical diagnosis; health care professionals are especially vulnerable.

He said there are three major symptoms: exhaustion, excessive rumination (which leads to cynicism), a pessimistic outlook, and a short temper.

"We know that negative thinking creates negative emotions in our body with the mind/body connection," he said.

"You have to focus on what you can control and what you can't. You can't control the economy, you can't control the virus and you can't control other

people's reaction. The only thing you can control is your attitude and your response.

"People think attitude means dancing in the street singing 'everything is coming up roses,' but that's not what attitude is at all," he said. "Attitude is how we talk to ourselves."

Some people are naturally negative thinkers, and Mr. Christopher said it takes work to keep a positive attitude.

"You can learn to become an optimistic neural pathway person, but it takes time and tools; that is where therapy comes in," he said.

There are positives to these times of uncertainty.

"Stress is not necessarily negative," he said. "We need some stress to grow. If someone lives a life of absolutely no stress at all, I don't think they are going to grow as a person and they are not going to have character, and character

creates wisdom, and wisdom is different than knowledge."

He said the wisdom we have learned through the virus is that our planet is "really, really small and we're all connected." Plus, it has raised the question about how we are going to treat other people.

The civil unrest over racial and political tensions also has opened up people's eyes to shifts that are transforming our society.

Those changes can lead to fear, he said.

"I think fear is gripping people big time right now, fear creates anxiety because the future is unknown, for instance we don't know if we're going to have a vaccine or not," he said.

Fear, he said, can be viewed as an acronym of False Expectations Appearing Real.

"Fear is an illusion, it doesn't actually

exist in reality, it only exists in the synapse of your brain," he said. "You control how you talk to yourself and how you think. The way to break through fear is to actually run headlong into it."

But too often, he said, people anticipate the worse-case scenario and just avoid the issue.

That's not to say that change isn't going to happen, but he said his best advice is to stay the course and realize that "this too will pass." ■

Joseph DeRosier is the CDS staff writer.

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