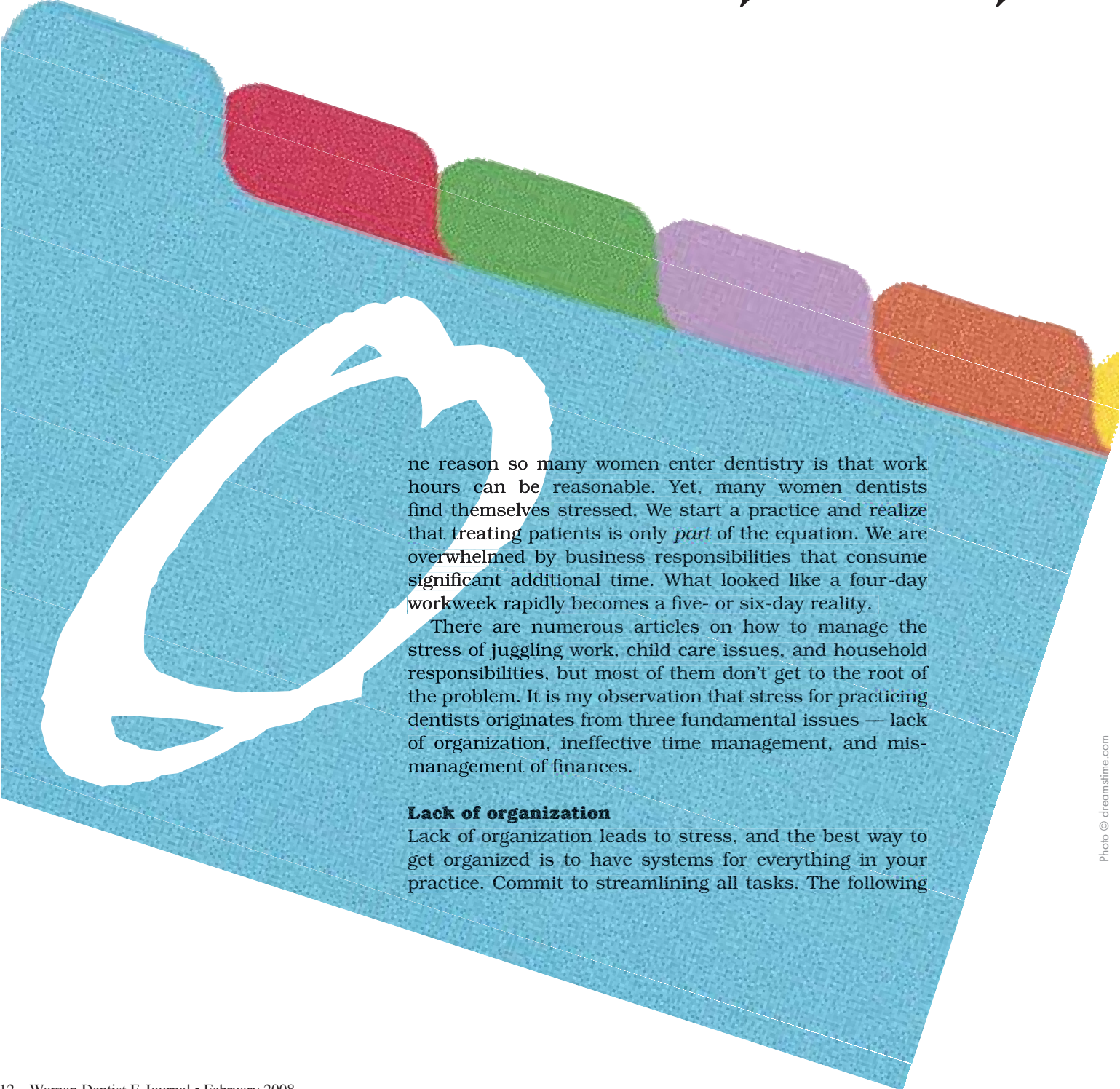


How to

DRASTICALLY

Reduce Stress in Your Professional Life



ne reason so many women enter dentistry is that work hours can be reasonable. Yet, many women dentists find themselves stressed. We start a practice and realize that treating patients is only *part* of the equation. We are overwhelmed by business responsibilities that consume significant additional time. What looked like a four-day workweek rapidly becomes a five- or six-day reality.

There are numerous articles on how to manage the stress of juggling work, child care issues, and household responsibilities, but most of them don't get to the root of the problem. It is my observation that stress for practicing dentists originates from three fundamental issues — lack of organization, ineffective time management, and mismanagement of finances.

Lack of organization

Lack of organization leads to stress, and the best way to get organized is to have systems for everything in your practice. Commit to streamlining all tasks. The following

Get a
STRESS-FREE
office

ORGANIZE

- ① Standard operating procedures
- ② Job descriptions
- ③ Filing system

MANAGE YOUR TIME

- ① Delegate
- ② Outsource
- ③ Manage your schedule closely

MANAGE YOUR FINANCES

- ① Control dental practice overhead
- ② Don't overextend personal finances

are some of the most important systems that can save you time:

① **Standard operating procedures** — Write SOPs for all operations in the practice, such as scheduling, accounting and billing, new-patient phone calls, and all clinical operations. SOPs are step-by-step instructions to complete a task. This leads to more clarity for all employees and less time wasted constantly explaining job actions.

② **Job descriptions** — Develop detailed, written job descriptions for every position in your office so that everyone is clear on what his or her responsibilities are. These descriptions need to be specific.

③ **Filing system** — To create a proper filing system, you need filing cabinets, hanging files, manila folders, and bookshelves. Designate a place for everything. Less time will be wasted searching for paperwork.

→ **Bills** — Instruct your staff to place all bills in your desk inbox. Once paid, the bills should be transferred to a “paid bills” box for the calendar year.

→ **Tax materials** — These should clearly be separated by month or quarter and the year for which they are intended. File monthly bank statements into a manila folder intended for that year.

→ **Staff/HR file** — This file includes performance review summaries for individual employees, new-employee interview notes, and payroll documentation.

→ **Professional journals** — Place journals in separate categories on a bookshelf or rip out and file particular articles that interest you. Articles can be filed alphabetically by topic, such as endodontics, oral surgery, and orthodontics.

④ **Conduct weekly staff meetings** — Meet weekly (a half-hour maximum) with your staff to set priorities for the week and head off any problems. You should have a standardized, preset agenda for these meetings. Designate a person to write the action points on a simple template.

Time management

In a dental office environment, I've found the following to be effective techniques to reduce chaos, free up your time, and decrease your stress.

① **Delegate** — Clearly define the guidelines for a particular task and then delegate it to your staff. Follow up and verify that the job has been done correctly. Two situations in which this might apply are:

a) **Lab cases** — Assign a specific staff person to send and track the status of lab cases. Require that all lab cases be sent the same or next day. Before a patient's appointment, your staff should open the lab case and ensure that there are no surprises. As a dentist, you only need to intervene if the lab has questions regarding a specific case.

b) **Dental supplies** — Assign a person to monitor supplies and order them. Review and sign off on each order before it is placed. The designated person has the responsibility of ensuring that the office does not run out of supplies. Establish a place where all team members can record supplies that are running low.

② **Outsource** — Find credible vendors and professionals and outsource a number of tasks. Most dental practices are small businesses and simply do not have the resources or professional competence to do everything themselves. Potential areas for outsourcing include IT support;

bookkeeping, payroll, and tax preparation; Web design; and various aspects of practice management.

⑥ **Manage your schedule closely** — Scheduling is a complex issue, and this article does not discuss any particular scheduling methodology. Here, however, are three basic steps to ensure that the schedule does not overwhelm you.

→ **Provide your staff clear guidelines regarding how much time is to be allocated for each procedure** — Add in extra time if you are working out of multiple chairs and doing hygiene exams and consults. Include recommendations on fitting emergency patients.

→ **Routinely review the four-day schedule with your team** — This allows you to head off problems and make adjustments. Look for areas in which you might need more time and that need to be blocked off.

→ **Make it clear to your staff that any changes that deviate from the agreed-upon guidelines should be discussed with the doctor before a commitment is made to a patient** — This way you will always know what patients know.

Mismanagement of finances

This probably causes more stress among dentists than anything else. It is usually not related to income, as the average woman dentist makes enough money to easily put her in the top 10 percent of wage earners among the U.S. population. Based on my observation, these are the root causes of financial stress among dentists:

① **Dental practice overhead** — Many dentists do not have a proper program to curtail spending in their office. These two tips will keep your overhead under control.

➤ **Equipment purchases** — Develop a plan to steadily upgrade the technology in your practice. Carefully evaluate the return on investment for a particular piece of equipment; the ones provided by vendors are usually overly optimistic and often ignore hidden costs. Consider the debt load from the purchase of the equipment and its impact on profitability. And remember, Section 179 tax advantages are no reason to buy equipment. You still pay \$1 to get a 35-cent tax benefit.

➤ **Supplies** — Identify cost-effective vendors for your supplies. Set a budget for dental supplies and assign a person with the responsibility to stay within that budget. Resist the temptation to buy something just because it is on sale. Monitor the inventory of supplies so that overnight shipments are reduced. Buy

nonperishable items in bulk when possible.

② **Overextended personal finances** — While this is not an article on personal finance, lifestyle choices and spending habits inevitably have an impact on your professional life and stress. Ultimately, all financial stress is directly related to the difference between our total household after-tax income and our monthly expenditure. We all need to enjoy life and not defer everything to retirement. At the same time, it is important to have a sense of priority and maintain a balance. Here are some suggestions:

❑ **Develop a plan for retirement and set aside money for retirement every month without fail.** This should be top priority. Remember to put in a safety factor to account for unexpected events that may curtail your income temporarily. This is an injury-prone profession and many dentists find they have to take time off for back- and neck-related problems, carpal tunnel syndrome, or other health matters.

❑ **Drive down all forms of debt.** Credit card debt should be eliminated to zero.

❑ **Reduce investment in depreciating assets, such as luxury automobiles.** As Andrew Tobias once said, “There is no smell more dangerous or costly than the new-car smell.” We don’t need to live a life of deprivation, but it may be prudent to wait until we can afford some of the more expensive things.

❑ **Set aside a slush fund for one vacation a year and stay within this limit.** This will prevent the tendency to overindulge. As additional funds become available, add to your vacation plans.

Summary

Where do you begin? Identify areas in your practice that contribute to high stress. Prioritize them, then resolve them one at a time. Consider hiring a summer student, outsource what you can, or seek the help of a practice-management firm.

Once the dental practice is organized and you have a better handle on your time and a stable financial situation, practicing dentistry becomes much more enjoyable. ■

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