



Understanding stress

What it does to your body and mind, and what helps

Stress is how your body and mind respond to pressure. A little can help you focus. The trouble starts when the pressure keeps going and there is no chance to recover.

What happens in your body

- Your heart beats faster and your breathing speeds up.
- Your muscles tighten. In dental work this often shows up in the neck, shoulders, jaw and hands.
- Your body releases stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol, to get you ready to act.

Once the pressure passes, your body is meant to settle. When the pressure keeps coming, it can stay switched on.

What it can do over time

- Trouble sleeping or switching off
- Trouble concentrating, and more small mistakes
- Feeling irritable, tense or teary
- Feeling tired or run down, with aches and muscle tension

Stress and sleep feed each other. Poor sleep makes stress harder to handle, and stress makes sleep harder.

What it can look like in a dental day

Back-to-back patients, anxious patients, running late and skipped breaks can keep your body on alert all day. Each is small, but they add up, in every role from the front desk to the chair.

What can help

- Short breaks, even two minutes, where you sit or stand still.
- Slowing your breathing for a minute, with a long, slow breath out.
- Moving your body: stretch your neck, shoulders and hands between patients.
- Enough sleep, and a clear signal that work is over for the day.
- Talking to someone you trust.

When to get more help

If stress is affecting your sleep, your mood or your work for weeks, it is a good idea to talk to someone. A counsellor, psychologist or doctor can help.

If you need support

Lifeline	13 11 14	24-hour crisis support
Beyond Blue	1300 22 4636	support by phone and online
Dental Practitioner Support	1800 377 700	registered practitioners; free, confidential, 24/7
In an emergency, call 000		

Look after yourself, and each other.

Source: McEwen BS. Physiology and neurobiology of stress and adaptation: central role of the brain. Physiol Rev. 2007;87(3):873-904.