



# Life Balance and the Busy Dental Professional

CINDY LYON, RDH, DDS, AND NADER A. NADERSHAHI, DDS, MBA

**ABSTRACT** The busy life of a dental professional demands we strive for a balance of time, energy, and interest to help ensure healthy and fulfilling personal and professional lives. Ideas supporting the commitment and planning necessary to achieving this balance are explored with specific focus related to our stage of practice.

## AUTHORS

**Cindy Lyon, RDH, DDS,** is chair of the Dental Practice Department, Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry, San Francisco.

**Nader A. Nadershahi, DDS, MBA,** is associate dean, Academic Affairs, Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry, San Francisco.

“Life is what happens while you are busy making other plans.”  
John Lennon, the gifted 20th British artist, easily could have been speaking to oral health care providers of the 21st century with these very words.

This final manuscript in this series devoted to topics related to the four stages of practice is intended to pose a foundation for the readers to reflect on their lives and how they leverage their time and efforts in pursuit of personal and professional fulfillment. The authors begin first by looking at some general characteristics of this great profession and then some topics related to each of the four stages of the dentists’ professional lives.

Whether just starting one’s professional career, shepherding a new practice out of the gates, honing a mature practice, or considering life after dentistry, there is a sizable amount of conversation surrounding the benefits and chal-

lenges of achieving balance in one’s life. The largest challenge may be defining one’s individual definition of balance, as this will surely vary for every person.

Confounding this desire for balance, an interesting study showed that “dentistry tends to attract people with compulsive personalities who often have unrealistic expectations and unnecessarily high standards of performance.”<sup>1</sup> There apparently is a need to excel in all areas of one’s life and this need can create stress. For some, these issues have a negative influence on personal and professional relationships, affecting physical health, mental health, or both.<sup>2</sup>

Although dentistry can be a stressful profession for those attracted to it, the good news is the majority of dentists enjoy their professional lives. Surveys conducted by the California Dental Association confirm that members are very satisfied with their chosen career.<sup>3</sup> This sentiment is supported by American

Dental Association research, which revealed that more than 70 percent of practitioners would definitely or probably enter dentistry again if given the chance to relive their lives.<sup>4</sup> Doing work one feels is meaningful and has value can be a source of great satisfaction. Given the enthusiasm for our work and desire to serve our patients, interest in giving to our families and communities, and the ever-increasing constraints on time, most of us search for some sort of balance in our busy lives.

Life balance can be expressed in a number of ways. Stephen Covey described the need to balance these overlapping quadrants of one's life: the physical, the social or emotional, the spiritual, and the mental dimensions.<sup>5</sup> L.D. Pankey, most notably, emphasized this to the dental profession as a balance between work, play, love, and worship.

However defined, balance is a moving target; the factors contributing to it are in constant motion and to achieve it requires some measure of consistent and conscious commitment and planning.<sup>6</sup> To plan, one needs to understand the point at which he or she is starting. One approach to doing this is to focus the discussions of balance as it relates to each of the four phases in the professional career of an oral health care provider.

### Stage 1

The new graduate faces a number of important challenges and decisions: finding and negotiating an associateship; deciding if, when, and how, to become a practice owner; learning to lead and manage people; guiding the business operations of a practice; and investing for debt reduction and retirement planning.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to these professional uncertainties, many new graduates are also beginning to wrestle with personal decisions. Like no group before it, the

current generation of new graduates value balance and integration of personal needs, family needs, and career requirements over more traditional motivators such as compensation and recognition.<sup>8</sup> This is a critical distinction between the millennial generation that is entering the profession and the baby boom generation that has been defining the profession.

Bringing these professional challenges and personal aspirations into alignment

**HOWEVER DEFINED,  
balance is a  
moving target;  
the factors contributing  
to it are in  
constant motion.**

requires planning and sound advice. There are a number of competing goals for one's income and energy such as paying down student loans, buying a car, positioning oneself to purchase a practice, saving for the down payment on a home, growing personal relationships, and professional or community volunteerism. Given these demands, it can be difficult to take the long view. However, discovering how much income is enough to support today's lifestyle and tomorrow's security is critical. Creating strategies to meet these financial goals will allow one to better prioritize and commit one's time.

To achieve this peace of mind, experts suggest first to assessing current needs versus wants by asking how much is enough? One author noted, "The concept of money is intertwined with the concepts of spirituality, creativity, family, service,

and other emotional aspects of personal satisfaction."<sup>9</sup> Once those lifestyle and retirement goals have been developed, it then can be determined whether the two can coexist. Committing to a plan that allows one to live well — within one's means — today and retire well tomorrow, is one of the most important life balance strategies to be realized.<sup>10</sup>

### Stage 2

Once initial philosophical decisions surrounding personal and professional choices have been made, life may change. Balance is a personal issue, shifting with the dynamic circumstances of our lives.

As a practitioner starting a new practice, a seemingly overwhelming amount of energy, time, and effort will be focused on the business. This kind of concentration on one area of life may be appropriate and part of a long-term balance strategy for a period, but it's important that this singular focus not become a lifelong habit.<sup>6</sup>

Patterns set in early years may last a lifetime so it is essential to be sure these patterns are positive ones. A study of physicians' personal wellness-promotion practices confirms the practical value of a healthier lifestyle. It noted that "healthy healers make more effective healers because they tend to give advice, interact with patients, and be role models in ways that resonate with their patients' broader expectations regarding health."

The researchers' findings go further, emphasizing the value of spending time and being involved with family, friends and colleagues; good nutrition, aerobic exercise, hobbies, reflection or meditation; and simply maintaining a general philosophical look on life that is positive.<sup>11</sup> This information underscores the importance of making sure that, in this stage of development, the practitioner is cementing good habits.

In that spirit, University of Alabama's Mark A. Satafford, MD, offered the following "open secrets" to achieving maximal health and well-being:<sup>12</sup>

- Eat a balanced diet with modest amounts of fat, meat, and refined sugar combined with a variety of fresh vegetables and fruits.
- Exercise (to the point of sweating), stretch and use one's muscles regularly, if possible, daily.
- Achieve and maintain your ideal body weight.
- Sleep a minimum of seven hours nightly.
- Do everything with balance and moderation, avoiding extremes.
- Learn to appreciate, laugh at life's ironies or, at least, not take yourself too seriously.
- Have intimate friends and at least one person with whom you can be completely open at all levels: spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and physically.
- Have a healthy and loving relationship with a higher power.
- Resolve conflict within oneself and with others in a timely fashion.
- Live in the moment, celebrating life with an attitude of gratitude.

Managing one's personal time, making choices, and declaring to oneself and others what you are truly committed to is a start to lightening the perceived burden. Learning to say no is a way to prioritize one's time and honor those areas of one's life that one believes are most important.<sup>6</sup> Dentistry is what one does, not who one is. Creating balance between the two is a challenging necessity for a healthy life and it is never too late to begin.

### Stage 3

During the height of our practicing careers, we apparently have the potential for the greatest satisfaction and the

greatest stress, studies support both.<sup>3-13</sup> In the absence of strong coping capacities, burnout can become a very real risk for the busy practitioner in full stride, with dentists 40 to 54 years of age tending to have higher levels of burnout related to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.<sup>14</sup> Decreasing stress and the physical and psychological symptoms that accompany it is a critical equilibrium to achieve at this stage of practice.

**SPEND TIME**  
on vision,  
strategy,  
and talent  
management,  
not micromanagement.

A study of business executives in high stress positions identified "three Cs" necessary for what they termed "stress hardiness" or the ability to cope with stress and maintain health and great job satisfaction. They had control over their work lives and a feeling they could control the impact of problems at work, if not the problems themselves. They enjoyed a sense of commitment and meaning to their work and relationships. They saw challenge as the norm and reacted with openness, flexibility, and innovation.<sup>15</sup>

Not only is it important for the leader of a practice in its prime to have the capacity to personally cope with stress and bring better balance to his or her own life, it's also incumbent upon them to bring these abilities to their teams. This directly benefits both one's patients and practice. Encouraging team members to become

involved in the organizational decisions of the practice engenders in them feelings of both control and commitment. Treating change as evolution rather than negative intrusion and eliciting ideas on how to incorporate changes into the fabric of the practice reduces team turnover and increases team satisfaction.<sup>15</sup>

Spend time on vision, strategy, and talent management, not micromanagement. By growing a strong team that understands the dentist's practice values, goals, and expected outcomes, one can increase employee satisfaction, serve the patient well, leverage oneself, and improve one's personal ability to achieve greater life balance.<sup>16</sup>

### Stage 4

For many, the idea of retirement is changing. Retirees returning to work cite appreciation of the intrinsic value of the work itself, they enjoy making a contribution, and thrive in the excitement of the workplace. One author surmised, "The traditional notion of retirement may be replaced with lifelong working, in various positions and in varying amounts of time throughout adult life."<sup>17</sup> Different from the relatively straight path that leads most people to retirement, the workplace becomes a dynamic setting for today's retirees with a variety of opportunities, including continuing one's education, beginning second careers, and exploring deferred ambitions.

Philosopher and author Mortimer Adler spoke eloquently about how one prepares for retirement, "that stretch of free time, in what is the prime of life, characterized by exemption from earning a living."<sup>18</sup> He described work as that which we do for intrinsic rewards, to provide for the comforts and conveniences we need. Adler distinguished leisure activities, which we presumably

have more time for in retirement, as altogether different from play, done purely for pleasure. He envisioned leisure as an activity with a moral imperative, the rewards of which include personal growth and development, advances in civilization, development of the arts and sciences, any form of learning, creative work, politically, or socially useful activity. Rather than the boredom of an endless vacation, he stressed the value of remaining engaged, challenged and productive, involved in such things as government, teaching, creative activities, study, even another form of work without compensation. He challenged a shift from “devoting one’s time from earning a living to living well.”

Provided one has planned well in all ways, these years may be some of our most productive and pleasurable, offering an altogether different challenge of balance with unlimited possibilities, a time to volunteer our professional services, to engage in new adventures, to give back.

## Final Comments

It is apparent that in this brief discussion, we are able to view only the small tip of the proverbial iceberg of life balance as it relates to the professional life of an oral health care provider in the different stages. The authors would like to leave the readers with a simple list of suggestions, regardless of which stage of practice your life finds you.

1. Decide what is really important to you.

- Begin by developing a vision for one’s personal and professional life.

- Prepare lists of personal and professional goals — divided into short- and long-term time frames.

- These goals should include qualitative issues such as health, lifestyle, practice type, and quantitative ones such as how much one would like to

put into retirement, how many new patients a month the practice would like to see, etc. Make sure there are no conflicts between any of the objectives on your list.

2. Review these lists regularly and use them to eliminate activities that consume your time but do not help you achieve your goals.

3. Ask for help.

Remember as we reflect upon, and search for balance in our busy lives, that striving to enrich mind, body, and spirit are truly worthy aspirations. Pulitzer Prize-winning American author, Annie Dillard says it a little differently than John Lennon as she reminds us that, “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.”

Best of luck in your search for your own unique version of balance. ■■■■

## REFERENCES

1. Lang-Runtz H, Stress in dentistry: It can kill you. *J Can Dent Assoc* 50:539-41, 1984.
2. Rada RE, Johnson-Leong C, Stress, burnout, anxiety and depression among dentists. *J Amer Dent Assoc* 135:788-94, 2004.
3. California Dental Association: Mind of the Dentist summary, prepared by Edge Research, 2005.
4. American Dental Association: Dentist well-being survey. American Dental Association Survey Center, 2003.
5. Covey S, The seven habits of highly effective people. New York, N.Y., Simon and Schuster, pages 288-99, 1989.
6. Whitworth L, Kimsey-House H, Sandahl P, Coactive coaching. Mountain View, Calif., Davis-Black Publishing, 1998.
7. Schumann TC, Top challenges for the new dentist. *J Calif Dent Assoc* 30(4):278, April 2002.
8. Sturges J, Guest D, Working to live or living to work? Work-life balance in the early career. *Human Resource Management* 14(4):5-20, 2004.
9. Smith L, Life planning — More than just money. [www.investopedia.com/articles/pf/06/lifeplanning.asp](http://www.investopedia.com/articles/pf/06/lifeplanning.asp). Accessed Feb. 2, 2009.
10. Artzberger W, Enjoy life now and still save for later. [http://www.investopedia.com/articles/retirement/07/enjoy\\_life.asp](http://www.investopedia.com/articles/retirement/07/enjoy_life.asp). Accessed Feb. 2, 2009.
11. Weiner EL, Swain GR, et al, A qualitative study of physicians’ own wellness-promotion practices. *Western J Med* 174(1):19-23, 2001.
12. Stafford MA, Ten habits for maximal living. [www.health.uab.edu/13358](http://www.health.uab.edu/13358). Accessed Feb. 2, 2009.
13. Gorter RC, Albrecht G, et al, Professional burnout among Dutch dentists. *Community Dent Oral Epidemiol* 27(2): 109-116,

April 1999.

14. Judkins S, Furlow L, Creating a hardy work environment: Can organizational policies help? *Texas J Rural Health* 21(4):11-7, 2003.

15. Kobasa SC, Maddi SR, Kahn S, Hardiness and health: A prospective study. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 42(1):168-77, January 1982.

16. Freidman SD, Lobel S, The happy workaholic: A role model for employees. *Acad Management Executive* 17(3): 87-98, Aug. 1, 2003.

17. Stein D, The new meaning of retirement. [www.ericdigests.org/2001-1/retirement.html](http://www.ericdigests.org/2001-1/retirement.html) Accessed Feb. 2, 2009.

18. Adler MJ. The parts of life. [http://www.aacp.org/Docs/MainNavigation/ForDeans/8689\\_AdleronthePartsofLife.pdf](http://www.aacp.org/Docs/MainNavigation/ForDeans/8689_AdleronthePartsofLife.pdf). Accessed Feb. 2, 2009.

## TO REQUEST A PRINTED COPY OF THIS ARTICLE, PLEASE CONTACT

Nader A. Nadershahi DDS, MBA, Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry, 2155 Webster St., San Francisco, Calif., 94115.