

## Editorial Mind-Body Wellness in Dentistry

It was a September morning, and as I walked into my second-year endodontic resident's operatory, she presented herself very differently than I had previously observed. She was moving fast, talking fast, and setting up her bracket tray at turbo speed. I was about to mentor her on her first apicoectomy. She began to articulate to me her fear in performing her first surgical procedure, concern that she would perforate the sinus and not be able to control the bleeding—and as all of this was happening, instruments began to fall on the operatory floor. I knew in that moment I could relate, because I once was in her shoes. However, being a long-time practitioner of yoga and meditation, I have evolved into a very different individual and a very different endodontist. More important than the apicoectomy, it was important for me to make her aware that she was not in the right frame of mind and body to perform this procedure on a patient, and it would ultimately compromise the outcome and her patient's experience.

I stepped out of my traditional clinical instructor mode and asked her if I could teach her a breathing skill that I know calms the body and focuses the mind. She agreed, and within minutes, I watched my stu-

dent's entire demeanor change. Her body relaxed, her breathing slowed down, and she centered herself. She looked at me with confidence and said, "I think I can do the surgery now." I knew my resident could perform the surgery, but what she realized is that she was now in the right frame of mind and body to perform surgery. My resident executed the procedure with excellent results, and the patient was happy and at ease.

When the clinic session ended, my resident shared her long-time struggles with anxiety and how she found ways to mask it over the years, but in that moment, it had gotten the best of her. In her seventh year of dental education, she was grateful to learn a new skill that helped her personally cope with her anxiety and simultaneously make her a better professional. This led me to pursue a formal training in yoga and meditation and to address the administration at Tufts University School of Dental Medicine on the importance of including mind-body wellness techniques in the curriculum for all students, specifically the ancient practices of yoga, diaphragmatic breathing, and mindfulness meditation. For the past 6 years in my role as Director of Mind-Body Wellness, I have witnessed the posi-

tive effects of teaching these practices to our students, incorporating them in the basic science curriculum, preclinical simulation lab, and patient clinic, and the impact it has had on students' overall personal and professional success.

The goal of dental providers is to deliver mindful, compassionate, and empathetic care to patients. This is achieved through competent clinical and technical skills in conjunction with sensitive communication skills. Dentistry is a stressful profession, and when stress is not managed properly in the clinical environment, it can affect this goal. In 1975, Benson et al published an article on the relaxation response, proving that stress not only contributes to health problems but that mental-focus techniques are good for the body and overall wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> The first code of ethics written by the American Dental Association (ADA) in 1866 states, "The dentist should be temperate in all things, keeping mind and body in the best possible health, that his patient may have the benefit of that clearness of judgement and skill which is their right."<sup>2</sup>

I don't know if back in 1866 the ADA was thinking of yogic breathing to achieve this goal, but the organization was definitely making the

connection between mind-body wellness and its effect on patient care. Whenever the body is relaxed and the mind is clear, we become consciously aware and therefore interact with the world differently. We are more skillful in our actions, we are better communicators and listeners, and we are more patient and kind to others and less reactive—all qualities that are essential for the dental professional. Mind-body wellness has found its place in our

institution and enriched our dental curriculum, community relationships, and clinical experiences. The world we live in today challenges us to be temperate in all things, but the choice is ours to strive to keep ourselves healthy in mind and body for ourselves, for our families, and to deliver the best care for our patients.

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## References

1. Benson H, Beary JF, Carol MP. The relaxation response. *Psychiatry* 1974;37:37–46.
2. Code of Dental Ethics (1866). *J Am Coll Dent* 2015;82:18–19.

