

Dr. Sally Safa - A Step to Better Health: Managing The Impact of Stress in Dentistry

Dr. O'Keefe: Today I welcome to Oasis Dr. Sally Safa who's a Toronto-based periodontist who did a master's degree, in her travels, on psychoneuroimmunology, the effect of stress on the body. And she's continued her studies to give her more knowledge of managing stress and she thinks it's a very important topic for dentist. A group of female dentists invited her recently to speak to them about managing stress. We're going to ask her what her experience is. You recently gave a presentation to about a hundred female dentists/colleagues and I think it was well received, from what I heard. What did you talk about?

Dr. Safa: Yeah. So, we spoke about stress and its effect for us as dentists. And it was following my own personal journey with what I felt as stress in dentistry. And this is not new to me because I actually did my master's in psychoneuroimmunology, which is actually very interesting because I've always had an interest in stress. So, my master's thesis was actually on stress, social support and periodontitis. So, when I decided to get into this field a little bit and do mindfulness for myself, as a personal journey, I was encouraged to speak to colleagues about it. So, when I spoke to these ladies and I got this overwhelming response of people with tears in their eyes, people feeling like what I shared was personal and something that they had also felt, it was really moving for me as a practitioner, as a person, to see their overwhelming response to this lecture. It was quite an interesting adventure for me.

Dr. O'Keefe: So why do you think you got the response that you did? It's like you open a gusher it seems?

Dr. Safa: Yeah. I think that it was something that, um, maybe the way I presented it or the way I said it, I feel like it struck a chord in my colleagues. I think that stress in dentistry is actually a huge problem and most of us don't recognize it. So, maybe I opened the forum for the recognition of stress in dentistry. I was giving examples of my own personal life. I was giving examples in just how we, as professionals, live our day-to-day lives in dentistry and it just seemed to open up this incredible sort of, uh, maybe an aha moment that my colleagues felt like, wow, someone's actually gonna talk about stress in dentistry. I think many of us feel it, but we don't feel that we are, we can talk about it or we're comfortable to share what we've been experiencing. So, that was definitely, it became quite apparent right away that we were all feeling the same thing.

Dr. O'Keefe: So, tell me what are the big stressors?

Dr. Safa: I didn't realize myself what the stressors were in dentistry. When I started practicing, I thought that these were unique to me. And I didn't realize that the

anxiety that I felt may have been actually partly as one of the first things that I noticed in my journey was coming from my patients. You know, we always talk about the anxious patient, but we never talk about the anxious dentists. And even my schooling, and I went to UofT, and it was an amazing education, but so much was emphasized for the anxious patient. No one told me that the anxious patient was going to create anxiety in me. And so, that was one of the main eye openers for me was that anxious patients can actually, just neurologically, just their nervous system being triggered and anxious can actually, I can absorb all of that.

Dr. Safa: I also didn't realize the type of environment that I'd be working in as a solo practitioner. The go go pace. Having to do very detailed accurate work in such a short period of time. Feeling the stressors of staff management and being in an isolated environment. We're not working outdoors. Our operatories usually don't have windows. We're very focused in on what we do. And just that gaze and focus actually triggers the sympathetic nervous system, which most dentists know the difference between the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system. But that, doing that finite work, on a moving target, day-to-day, can actually constantly be triggering the sympathetic nervous system. So, these, all these things combined seem to really create an environment that's just perfect for chronic stress.

Dr. O'Keefe: So, let's say I'm a guy who's, you know, engaging in all of those behaviors and I'm not doing anything about it, but now I feel, geez, I better do something about it. What are the main avenues of improvement that I can take? Give me some of the strategies that I should start exploring.

Dr. Safa: Yeah, I think as a first strategy and probably the most important is recognition. Most of us don't even recognize that we're stressed. The first thing is recognizing what are my stressors? Because what might stress me on a day-to-day basis might not stress you on a day-to-day basis. You and I may have very different upbringings, many different coping mechanisms and strategies that we have. Some of us have a lot of support, some of us don't have a lot of support. Many dentists are isolated. So, I feel that recognizing what you have is number one. And once we've recognized what our stresses are, we can then choose two pathways. We either can respond or react. When we're triggered with the sympathetic nervous system, with a stressor, most of us react. That's normal, it's a very immediate reaction.

Dr. Safa: It's something we got to do right away. It has a bit of a zinginess to it. Like, you know, we're upset with a staff member and we got to do something about it right now. Many of us don't actually, um, respond. And response requires time, response requires bringing ourselves to a bit of a different mindset, calming the nervous system down before we can just right away, um, attack situation or problem that we have. So, we recognize the stressor, we can choose to respond

or react, and that that decision tree, whether we respond or react, takes time because neurons that fire together, wire together. So, if we're constantly used to reacting and not responding, it's going to take time to change that. So, a tool such as, you know, engaging in mindfulness is a way to really be present to our life.

Dr. Safa: And just that presence and awareness allow you to take a moment and say, hold on, I usually react and now I can respond.

Dr. O'Keefe: So, walk me through. Give me some advice now. I'm really stressed doing this interview, as you can see. Walk me through, you know, coming away from the react to respond. Give me advice.

New Speaker: Yeah. So, the first thing that we do when we react is, we tense-up. The heart rate goes up. Our breathing is usually shallow and rapid. We're usually, you know, we've got our chronic sort of neck and back tension. So as a first it's, we realize, okay, you know what, I'm in this state. A tool like a breathing bubble is such an easy way to really practice breathing. Most of us breathe with our chest and that's a very sympathetic type of breathing. When we drop the breathing down to a diaphragm breathing, we really give our body the opportunity to right away, and something very simple, trigger the parasympathetic nervous system.

Dr. Safa: So the minute we dropped the diaphragm down, we're going to release all the good hormones and we're going to try to flush out sort of some of that crazy stuff running through our bodies. So, we recognized it. We can do lots of different mindfulness tools such as feeling our sort of bums on the chair, feeling ourselves, really grounding ourselves and bringing the edge off a little bit. As soon as the edge comes off of a stressor, so if you're a person who's really zinged-up, really worked-up, the minute you just trigger a little bit of your parasympathetic nervous system, we immediately fall into just a tiny bit of a, a bit more room. The minute you give yourself more room options become available. Many of us can't find that room because we're so wired that way. So, to find the room, to find the space for other options, is really the opportunity that we're trying to give ourselves in that moment. So, you've walked in, you know, you just had a difficult patient, you're so zinged-up, the minute you're just able to do something as simple as breathing, feeling the chair, taking one minute, you will then be able to have other options. And some of those options are short term and some of those options are our long term.

Dr. O'Keefe: So, you're introducing me to a concept, mindfulness. I've heard of it. I've never really looked into it. Have you, maybe we can put some links in the Oasis post with this interview. Have you suggestions for some places where I can get further information?

Dr. Safa: For sure. Mindfulness is the new black. Everyone's talking about mindfulness, which is great because it's actually bringing this topic to light and it's actually allowing us to actually see that we're stressed. Like mindfulness is helping people to recognize their stressors. And mindfulness, in its definition, is really just being present right here to your life. It isn't changing anything. People often think mindfulness is meditation and it's not. Meditation is completely different. Mindfulness is just being present in just what is and what is might be very difficult, which is the challenge you're having in dentistry or whatnot and just bringing awareness to our day-to-day. That's what mindfulness is. And so, the tools that will help us become mindful, or to bring mindfulness into our day-to-day could be using tools such as a lot of apps.

Dr. Safa: You know, there's some apps that you can just download on your phone, one of them is called Headspace. And I've used lots of the modules in Headspace myself personally and these walk you through, it's almost like mindfulness for dummies, which I think is really helpful to give an introduction. Another one is Calm. And Calm has lots of different, um, it's an app, you just download it on your phone, and it has lots of resources, lots of different modules. So, for example, you have a really stressful event you can just follow, you know, pick up your phone, open an app and really be able to trigger that being present and bringing some of that mindfulness onboard. These are very electronic ways of getting it right away.

Dr. O'Keefe: And it doesn't sound like a very expensive hobby to take-up, eh?

Dr. Safa: No, no, and they're easy to use. And you know, there's so many resources right now and if you just walk, if you're not a techie person, and you walk into any bookstore, Chapters, you're going to find a whole section. And what I would suggest you gravitate to is a very simple thing, there's a couple of mindfulness magazines out there. So, one of them is called mindful. I actually have one here, mindful. You know, you pick up this journal, you just flip through it. It actually has lots of different articles, people, everyday people. This particular edition had a nurse on it who's using mindfulness in her day-to-day life. And you then can get an idea of what tools are out there.

Dr. Safa: And in these magazines, you know, no one wants to pick up a book sometimes it's so cumbersome. We're reading so much in dentistry. Apps, a magazine like this, you know, can, can really just jumpstart that into other things, which people might be interested in reading, some of Dr. Kabat-Zinn's work on mindfulness. And he's a guru in the field. And I'll have links for that, you know, as you mentioned John. And definitely meetings, there's mindfulness meetings all over Toronto. Luckily, we're surrounded, we're in an urban environment where we've got lots of resources. And you know, my husband said something interesting recently, he said you are the some of five people you spend the most time with. So, one of the things is surrounding yourself with people who share

the same values that you do. So, in my journey, I found that being surrounded by people who also have the same values, they want to be mindful, they want to be present, you know, colleagues in dentistry, but those who share the same passion for a lifelong profession that we can practice in and be healthy doing so is really helpful to surround ourselves. And I think more and more, hopefully in dentistry, we're going to see more offered on mindfulness and tools that can help us in our profession.

Dr. O'Keefe: Just as you were talking there it just hit me that, you know, maybe there's room for a mindfulness-based study club for like minded [inaudible] An essential part of what the group does is get the parasympathetic system fired.

Dr. Safa: Yeah. Yeah, That's it! And if that's all you do. And the thing is when you surround yourself with a group of people who are like-minded and they are also a dentist, what I find is it creates this synergy and this movement of working more towards being present. And then you can share ideas, not just necessarily about how do I do that root canal, how do I do that crown prep, but how do I incorporate being present or mindful more into my practice?

Dr. O'Keefe: Just a quick wrap up. If anybody has any questions, would you be prepared to come back and answer them for people?

Dr. Safa: Yes. Sure, I would absolutely love to. And I think, um, I'm really encouraged by the fact that you have taken this on and had the interest to do it and that hopefully the profession has it more. And of course, I'm available, but also, you know, it's nice to surround ourselves and maybe develop this a little bit more. So, thank you.

Dr. Safa: Well, Sally just on that very point, you know, I'm involved right now on a project that was, you know, started off as like a practice management project and we tried to scope out what might be the range of topics within that and what a staff colleague and I have come up with is, you know, mind your career, mind yourself, and mind your business. You, you, are the most important element of your practice and if you're under duress, the quality of the care that you deliver is going to suffer.

New Speaker: Yeah. 100%. Yeah.

Dr. O'Keefe: Thank you very much.

Dr. Safa: Thank you, John. Thank you so much.