

Time Management



Time is probably the only democratic resource in the world. No matter who we are, what we do or where we live, we all have 24 hours in every day, with 60 minutes in each. We cannot attempt to manage time, but what we can do is to manage ourselves to better use time.

Dentistry is one such profession where you have the further constraint of patient appointments. Every hour is not yours to prioritise and decide what needs doing, as much of this is dictated by who your next appointment is and how long it is expected to last!

However, there are still other things that need doing – filling and submitting forms and paperwork, ordering supplies, wages administration, dealing with any problems with staff/associates/principals etc. not to mention family responsibilities and that all important “me time”!

Sometimes it is really hard to do everything you are meant to without feeling guilty for neglecting your loved ones, or feeling burned out because you have no time to yourself. Remember, your health and well being are the most important things in the world and nothing should put strain on that. Follow these steps to try to get the most out of your time:

Once you start using this tool, you will wonder how you ever coped without it!

Use a notebook

Keep a small notebook with you and have each page divided up roughly into three columns. At the top of the first, write "A", at the top of the second, write "B" and the top of the third write "C".

"A" is for "must do" tasks. These are urgent matters either because they must be completed by a certain deadline (e.g. certain forms), or because you have made a promise or commitment to someone to do it (e.g. paying wages on say the first of every month).

"B" is for "should do" tasks. These are things that may contribute to improved performance or effectivity, but are not essential or do not have critical deadlines.

"C" is for "nice to do" tasks. These are things which you do have to do at some point, but can be done when you are going through a "slack" time or are low on energy.

Every time, you remember something, or are made aware of something you have to do, jot it down under the relevant column. If you are not sure which category tasks may belong to, ask yourself the following:

a Will my work or other people (e.g. patients, staff) suffer if I don't do this urgently?

If the answer is yes, it is almost certainly priority "A". If you answered "no" go to the next question.

b Is this something that I can put off doing until the bank holiday coming up in 6 weeks?

If the answer is "yes" it is almost certainly priority "C". If you answer no, it is probably priority "B".

After you have done this for about four weeks, you will notice things that come up at regular intervals, particularly for priority "A". These are your regular commitments. The most usual things they include could be monthly forms, wages etc. As these are predictable, you can set aside a certain time to deal with them, and then stick to it. For example, you can spend a period of time before you leave the surgery on the last Friday evening of every month sorting out pay for associates.

As you do each task, note down how long you spent on it. This will help with planning when to do tasks. You may be surprised how different the time period you spend on each task is, compared to what you thought you spent on it!

Whenever you have a bit of free time to do one of your tasks, make sure you pick up something from the "A" category, unless you have a fixed time to do that.

2 Make the "Pareto Principle" work for you.

This is the 80-20 rule which basically means that 80% of your patients produce 20% of your income, 20% of your patients produce 80% of what you need etc. Use this to streamline your activities. The actual ratio of 80/20 may be different for you, but as a concept, it is useful to ensure you do not spend a lot of time doing something that is not going to yield results! It may help you to focus more.

3 Analyse how much time you spend working (include working from home!) to see how much time is left for your family.

If you feel brave enough, ask your loved ones if they think you are around enough. It may be hard to swallow but they are the only ones who will tell you!

4 Set aside some time for yourself every day.

It is a fallacy that this must be something like a relaxing soak or a visit to a spa. It could be as simple as 10 minutes in your local café with a big slice of chocolate cake (not everyday obviously!)

Effective time management is not a "desk job" related concept. On the contrary it is more useful for professions such as dentistry where there are other time constraints in place.

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