

KNOW THE DRILL

How Dentists Can **Avoid Burnout**,
Find Purpose, and **Thrive in Modern Practice**

**DR. JEFF
GROVE**



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For Renie—my wife, my partner, my home. Every win in my life is a shared win, and every step forward has been because of you. There are no words for the gift you've been to me. You are the most incredible spouse and partner a man could ever ask for, and I am the luckiest.

For my dad—for always believing this book was in me, long before I believed it myself.

For my mom—for a lifetime of love, encouragement, and the kind of steady support that shapes who a person becomes.

And for Brady, Anna, and Tyler—you three inspire me every day to be the best version of myself. Watching you grow into who you're becoming is the greatest privilege of my life. Always becoming.

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INTRODUCTION

Who Would Want to Be a Dentist?

PICTURE THIS: AN ALIEN ANTHROPOLOGIST LANDS ON

Earth and decides to study human behavior. After observing us for a few weeks, they're completely baffled by one particular ritual they keep witnessing in small, sterile rooms across the planet.

"Field report number forty-seven," the alien dictates into their data pad. "The humans have developed the most bizarre healing ceremony I have ever encountered in my travels across seventeen galaxies.

"They gather in these bright, clinical chambers where one human—apparently the 'healer'—convinces another human to lie down and open the primary orifice of their sensory command center. This opening, located directly beneath their breathing apparatus and between their communication organs, serves as the

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gateway to their entire digestive system. It's like working inside a control tower while all the alarms are still functioning.

"Inside this opening are thirty-two small white bone-like appendages—not actually bone, mind you, but covered in the hardest substance their human bodies produce. These appendages function as tools for eating food, but they are constantly under attack by microscopic organisms and acid due to the humans' peculiar diet of fermented plant matter and processed sugars.

"But here's where it gets truly strange: The 'healer' then performs what can only be described as precision carpentry on living tissue. They inject numbing chemicals directly into the flesh, then use diamond-coated rotating instruments—essentially tiny construction tools—to carve away diseased portions of these appendages. Sometimes they reshape them. Other times they remove them entirely and replace them with artificial substitutes.

"The most perplexing part? The humans *pay* for this experience. They schedule appointments months in advance. They bring their offspring for the same treatment. And get this—sometimes they request these procedures purely for aesthetic reasons, believing that the appearance of these small white appendages will improve their chances of finding a mate or advancing in their social hierarchy.

"I have observed creatures across the cosmos, but never have I seen a species that voluntarily allows another member to perform precision engineering on their sensory control center while they remain conscious and alert to every vibration, every sound, every sensation. The humans call this 'dentistry,' and remarkably, both the healer and the patient seem to think this is perfectly normal.

"Requesting immediate reassignment to study the Zorbonians

of Alpha Centauri. Their ritual of juggling flaming plasma balls while blindfolded seems far more reasonable by comparison.”

And that, my friends, is exactly what we dentists do every single day. We’ve convinced an entire civilization that it’s perfectly reasonable to let us perform detailed construction work inside a nerve-rich region of their anatomy, using power tools, while they’re wide awake—and they pay us for it.

When you put it that way, dentistry isn’t just weird—it’s absolutely ridiculous. And yet, somehow, it’s one of the most trusted, respected, and essential professions on the planet.

It’s also one of the best jobs out there. It offers a unique blend of science, artistry, entrepreneurship, and the chance to make a real difference in people’s lives. You can run a small business, build long-term relationships, and contribute to your community in ways few other professions allow.

But this profession that offers so much is also driving many of its practitioners to feel hopeless, to consider giving up, and to question their very place in the world. They are plagued by four major problems:

- Burnout
- Generational gaps
- Debt
- Underpreparedness

We’ll explore each of these in detail in chapter 1. But for now, let’s briefly review them.

DENTISTRY'S FOUR MAJOR PROBLEMS

Burnout

Burnout is not just a buzzword in dentistry—it's a documented, growing crisis. Recent research shows that in the six months leading up to the 2023 American Dental Association (ADA) survey, more than 40 percent of dentists felt defeated, wanted to quit, or did not want to go to work at least once a month. These feelings were especially common among dentists under forty-four years old.¹

Other studies show this is an issue around the world, not just in the US. A 2024 cross-sectional study of Turkish dentists found that 91.7 percent experienced high emotional exhaustion, the core component of burnout, and 66 percent had high depersonalization. Depression was also prevalent, with 10 percent of dentists reporting severe depression and 36 percent experiencing moderate depression.²

Burnout is not just about feeling tired or unmotivated. It's a syndrome defined by the World Health Organization as "chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed," characterized by exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy.³ Burnout leads to poor patient care, increased absenteeism, clinical mistakes, and financial losses for practices.

Over time, burnout can create a higher risk of dentists leaving the profession.⁴ If too many dentists walk away, we could find ourselves with a public health crisis. Too few dentists means rising costs and lack of access to care, especially for patients in underserved regions.

Generational Gaps

The divide between the different generations of dentists mirrors broader societal changes. Psychologist Jean Twenge's research shows that each generation is especially shaped by the technology and culture of its formative years.⁵

Generation Z, raised on smartphones and social media, expects flexibility, work-life balance, and rapid feedback. They are less likely to see owning a practice as the endgame and are more likely to seek employment in group practices or dental support organizations (DSOs).⁶

Data from the ADA Health Policy Institute shows that practice ownership among dentists under the age of thirty-five has nearly halved in the past decade,⁷ and DSO affiliation among new graduates is at an all-time high.⁸ This shift is not just about economics—it's about values, expectations, and the very nature of professional identity.

Older generations who remember the “golden age” of solo practice often struggle to understand why younger dentists are less interested in ownership and more focused on flexibility and quality of life. This generational tension affects mentorship, practice transitions, and the future of the profession.

Debt

The financial burden on new dentists is staggering. The average dental school graduate in the US now carries nearly \$300,000 in student loan debt.⁹ This is a monetary and psychological weight that shapes career choices, practice models, and even personal well-being.

For one thing, high debt loads are associated with increased stress and weariness among dentists.¹⁰ Debt also limits options. Many new dentists feel trapped, unable to leave the profession or take entrepreneurial risks because of their financial obligations.¹¹

Unlike in other professions where job-hopping is common, dentistry's high debt and long training make it hard to walk away. This can create a sense of being stuck, especially if the reality of practice does not match the dream.

Underpreparedness

Anecdotal and research evidence alike show that new dentists often feel underprepared for the realities of practice. As one of my dental school professors said, "We come out as competent beginners with so much still to learn." My experience working with young dentists confirms this. Many struggle with basic clinical skills, patient communication, and team management.

A 2021 study of US dentists found that 13 percent met criteria for burnout, and only 16 percent were highly engaged at work.¹² New graduates in particular reported high stress, low confidence, and difficulty adapting to the demands of practice.

This underpreparedness is not just clinical—it's also psychological. "Younger age groups of dentists have higher percentages of members who are distressed or struggling when compared with older groups."¹³ Today's new dentists often lack the resilience and independence needed to thrive in a demanding profession.

WHY IT MATTERS

I didn't grow up wanting to be a dentist. I wanted to be a professional football player for the New York Giants. My dad was a dentist, and I admired his work-life balance, but I sensed he didn't love dentistry—it was a means to an end.

My Story

I always liked writing, so I majored in English in college. But to keep my options open, I added a second major in biology. I figured if push came to shove, I could get a job at my dad's practice.

Enjoying biology more than expected, I ended up going to dental school. At Penn Dental I discovered I was good with my hands and with people. I honed my skills, took continuing education courses, and after a few years got curious about the business side of dentistry.

Eight years out of dental school, I bought out my dad, expanded the practice, and eventually built a ten-location DSO. We sold the group in 2024, and I shifted to teaching, writing, and coaching, while still practicing clinically. (You'll get to read more of my story throughout the book, as I use it to highlight important points and key lessons.)

I've seen every side of this profession: the joy, the burnout, the business, the leadership, and the personal growth. I'm committed to helping others navigate these challenges because I know how hard—and how rewarding—dentistry can be.

What's at Risk

Dentistry is one of the last great cottage industries in America. It offers independence, financial freedom, and the chance to build something meaningful. But the industry as we know it is under threat.

We're now facing what has happened to medicine: "Once regulated largely by the conscience of the individual practitioner, many fields are becoming constrained and corporatized by governmental and professional structures, resulting in the professional's loss of autonomy, status, and the respect of the public."¹⁴

If dentistry goes the way of the medical industry—consolidated, corporatized, and protocol driven—we lose more than just business ownership. We lose professional freedom, patient relationships, community impact, and the ability to innovate and lead.

Loss of autonomy is a key driver of dissatisfaction among both physicians and dentists.¹⁵ When practitioners become "double agents" for insurers and corporations, the doctor–patient relationship suffers and so does quality of care.¹⁶

If we don't fight to protect dentistry's independence, we risk becoming "disengaged, intellectually lazy doctor–technicians" practicing "cookbook" dentistry for a salary, with little control over our work or our future.¹⁷

Combine these threats with the four major problems outlined above and you can see just how much dentistry stands to lose. These challenges will no doubt feed on each other, creating a downward spiral that could quickly get out of control.

Before you slip into despair, I firmly believe there is a powerful and proven solution, and it's one that each of us can cultivate.

THE SOLUTION

Over my years of dental practice, management, business ownership, coaching, and leadership, I've discovered a specific set of skills and competencies—an armamentarium, if you will—that has demonstrated its value time and again:

- **Awareness:** Research shows that self-awareness is linked to lower burnout and higher job satisfaction.¹⁸ Self-awareness consists of inner knowledge, emotional intelligence, and an honest assessment of your strengths, weaknesses, and values.
- **Vision:** Psychotherapist Viktor Frankl argues that finding meaning in adversity is key to developing resilience and maintaining psychological well-being.¹⁹ Vision is about finding a clear sense of purpose and direction that is grounded in intrinsic motivation rather than external rewards.
- **Surrender:** Acceptance of what you can't control, and a focus on what you can, are key to bearing hardship. Concentrating on what you can't control makes you stressed, but concentrating on what you can control makes you powerful.²⁰
- **Relationships:** Social support is one of the strongest predictors of happiness and professional fulfillment.²¹ To thrive as a dentist, you need rewarding connections with patients, teams, mentors, and peers.

- **Agility:** The ability to learn, pivot, and grow is essential in a rapidly evolving dental industry. Flexibility and adaptability in the face of change are essential skills for today's dentists.
- **Genius:** Research on work engagement shows that using your strengths daily is a key to thriving.²² Discovering and developing your unique abilities, talents, and passions are important for differentiating yourself.
- **Leadership:** It's time to take responsibility for your own growth and for creating positive change in your practice, profession, and community. You have the power to shift the narrative.

We'll unpack each of these individually in the coming chapters.

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF THIS BOOK

This book is a breath of fresh air—a new way of looking at dentistry that's grounded in research and real-world experience. You'll learn strategies for staying energized, avoiding burnout, and building a practice that reflects your values and vision. You'll discover how to personalize the armamentarium to fit your unique situation.

At the end of each chapter, you'll find a list of reflection questions to help you carefully consider how to apply the lessons to your practice. I suggest writing your responses in a journal or discussing them with a trusted mentor.

To get the most out of this journey, you'll need to put in time, effort, and honest self-reflection. As James Clear writes, "Growth

demands discomfort. We need something to push against to learn how strong we can become.”²³

I encourage you to personalize these strategies, adapt them to your practice, and revisit them when you feel discouraged. And most importantly, don't be afraid to ask for help. You can get in touch with me via my website at www.ascensiondentalcoach.com.

Dentistry is hard, but it's worth it. Despite the challenges, it still offers the chance to have a career of purpose and impact. But we have to fight for our profession, protect ourselves from burnout, and learn to thrive in a changing world.

The future of dentistry is in our hands. The best is ahead!

Now—let's get started.

CHAPTER 1

They Don't Prepare You for Lap Dances in Dental School

IT WAS MY FIRST CHRISTMAS SEASON AS A YOUNG dentist, barely a year or two into practice. I was hunched over a patient, meticulously working on a filling, when my front desk team burst in with barely contained excitement.

“Doctor Jeff, you have to come to the break room,” they said, grinning. “Anne brought you a surprise.”

Anne was one of my regulars—a sweet eighty-year-old woman who seemed to always need dental work, which meant I’d gotten to know her well over our many appointments.

I finished up the filling and headed to the break room, expecting maybe homemade cookies or a fancy Christmas card. What I found instead was Anne standing in a long trench coat, fully made

up with lipstick and rouge, holding a boom box and wearing a boa around her neck, with feathers peeking out from under her collar.

Before I could process what was happening, she hit play on her boom box. Eartha Kitt's sultry voice filled the room: "Santa baby . . ." Anne directed me to sit in a chair, which I did obediently but with a fair amount of uncertainty.

While my entire staff watched in stunned amusement, she draped her feather boa around my neck, pulled me up to dance, and whispered with a wink, "It might not all be in the same place, but it's there, baby," referring to her figure that had changed over time. Inspired by her courage and charisma, I set aside any feelings of awkwardness and played along, hoping to help her feel bold, daring, and free.

In the end, it was the sweetest, most G-rated lap dance in history. One of my team members even captured it on a flip phone camera. (I wonder if that video still exists somewhere.) And as entertaining and endearing as the whole thing was, it made me realize something profound: Dental school had prepared me for cavities, root canals, and periodontal disease, but nobody had prepared me for the beautiful, unpredictable, deeply human moments that would define my career.

Anne taught me that dentistry isn't just about teeth—it's about people, and people are full of surprises. In fact, as I would learn over time, this whole profession is filled with the unexpected.

WE MAKE OMELETS, NOT CAKES

Here's a harsh reality for new dentists: The exactness of your methodical, calculated, and analytical personality doesn't always

mesh well with the flexibility, patience, and creativity that dentistry actually requires.

Most of us are drawn to the profession because we like precision, predictability, and control. But real-world dentistry? It's filled with variability, ambiguity, even chaos. It's more like cooking an omelet than baking a cake. Allow me to explain.

Making an omelet involves a number of variables:

- People crack eggs differently.
- They use different utensils to whisk.
- Some add milk or cream, others don't.
- Salt, pepper, and spices vary by taste and ratio.
- There are a dozen different ways to flip it.
- Some cook it through, others leave it gooey.
- Cheese can go in early or late.
- Toppings range from a bit of garnish to fully loaded.

Despite these differences, each version of an omelet can be delicious in its own way, allowing for a pretty darn good breakfast. Even when I make an omelet that isn't my best work, my teenagers still think it's the greatest thing they've ever eaten.

Baking a cake, however, demands exactness. Great bakers know to weigh ingredients rather than use measuring cups. They also know how to resist the temptation to open the oven door and how to avoid overmixing their batter.

Where I live, in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, baking at high elevation presents additional challenges—ingredients need to be

used at precise temperatures, flour must be properly sifted and aerated, and recipes must be adjusted for low humidity and air pressure. Without this precision the cake may not rise properly, let alone taste good.

In dentistry there are many different ways to fix a tooth, influenced by a variety of internal and external factors. Plus, very few cavities look like the textbook examples or the plastic teeth we practiced on in dental school.

And removable dentures? Forget about it. Every one of those is its own unique hot mess filled with all kinds of complications that still drive me bonkers from time to time.

On top of these challenges, all of the mouths and teeth we work on are attached to different and unique human beings. The individual needs, concerns, and preferences of each patient add nuance, complexity, and difficulty to even the most straightforward dental care.

Just like cooks, we must know how to improvise, be creative, and play with our ingredients in order to navigate the profession's inherent inexactness. We have to learn to accept that "good enough" is often just right.

EXPECTATIONS VERSUS REALITY

Unfortunately, most new dentists' expectations don't line up with this reality. We enter dental school thinking we'll learn exact, predictable, calculated procedures, and to a large extent, we do. Dental school is a controlled environment. It needs to be so that we can learn and practice with minimal risk to ourselves and others.

But when we get out into the field, we face the reality of

working with real humans, which means so much is beyond our control. When we work on patients, we're treating someone who is alive and breathing, someone whose oral health is affected by many factors: age, diet, genetics, hygiene habits, tobacco use, stress, hormone levels, access to care, and more. A person's mouth is not exactly a lab-like environment.

This requires us to be improvisers, adapters, and creative problem solvers. We have to understand the medical and mechanical fundamentals, but we also have to learn to apply them creatively. We have to be willing to bend rules to create mutually agreeable outcomes for patient and dentist alike.

It also means we have to treat and respect the patient as a real person rather than a science experiment. Ultimately, dentistry is a people profession.

A PEOPLE PROFESSION

The foundation of everything we do isn't our fancy instruments, high-tech equipment, or even our technical skills—it's our relationships and communication. Whether with patients, assistants, hygienists, front desk staff, or vendors, our ability to connect and communicate determines whether our practice thrives or merely survives.

Dentistry is a hands-on craft requiring incredible skill, patience, self-awareness, and the ability to navigate countless human interactions. It's a complex dance between dentist, team, and patient. When done well, it's magical. When done poorly, it's messy, to say the least.

Here's the challenge: The intricate "arts and crafts" of our profession—the detailed, sometimes microscopic work we do with

our hands—are so overwhelming and difficult when we're learning them that we simply don't have the bandwidth to deal with all the nuances of human interaction.

I call this the “ugly duckling” phase. It's the overwhelming period during which new dentists are trying to master complex technical skills while simultaneously learning to manage expectations and relationships. Everything feels clunky and difficult.

But allow me to let you in on a little secret: Being an ugly duckling is okay. In fact, it's supposed to happen, and there's no good way around it. You have to journey through it.

Successfully navigating the ugly duckling phase is key to a long and successful career in this profession. Those who embrace the arts-and-crafts nature of dentistry—the creativity, the improvisation, the human element—tend to find joy and longevity in their careers. Those who fight against it, expecting only the precision and predictability they thought they signed up for, often struggle with frustration, discouragement, and eventually, burnout.

This brings us back to dentistry's four major problems—problems that only get worse for those who don't learn to align their expectations with the realities of the profession. Let's look at each problem in more detail.

BURNOUT AND HOPELESSNESS

My season of burnout and hopelessness came around year five of my career, ironically, right when my dentistry had finally become “good enough” after countless hours of continuing education and thousands of repetitions. You'd think this would've been a time to relax a bit and enjoy moving past the ugly duckling phase. But

instead, it's when I started asking myself a soul-crushing question: *Is this it? Am I really going to be doing this for the rest of my life?*

That led to a downward spiral of other existential questions: *How am I going to wake up every day, put on my loupes and a cheerful smile, and give my best energy for my patients and my team? How long will it be until I get extremely bored with filling cavities or too tired of talking to chatty patients or worn out from all the dental conferences or . . . ?*

Here's what made it worse: Most of my college friends with business, accounting, and similar degrees had explored multiple professions by this point and had finally settled into something successful. They had flexibility. If they wanted to, they could have ten three-year careers, instead of one thirty-year career.

But I went to dental school. And when you go to dental school, it's a commitment that doesn't allow for bouncing around. It requires massive investment—good grades, years of training, money, time, and opportunity cost. (While friends are working and earning paychecks, you are grinding away on fake teeth.)

Less than a decade into my career, I already felt trapped. *I'm a dentist now, and like it or not, I'm probably stuck being a dentist forever.* I think that's exactly how a lot of dentists feel. Maybe it's even how you feel.

This feeling of being stuck was overwhelming, and over time it led to feeling burnt out. Here's how burnout manifested for me:

- It was hard to get out of bed in the morning.
- Days started running together.
- The work felt boring and monotonous.

- Maintaining energy and focus felt impossible (and both are required to be a good dentist).
- I wasn't being a good leader for my team anymore.
- I began engaging in risky behaviors outside of work just to feel alive and stimulated—things like drinking more alcohol, driving fast cars, and spending too much time and money at country clubs with my golf buddies.
- I constantly looked forward to the next day off, the next vacation, the next time I could breathe and relax.
- I felt alone in my hopelessness.

Finding my way back from this wasn't easy, but I worked through it with concentrated effort to reinvent myself as a dentist, business owner, and leader. I decided to learn about other aspects of the profession—marketing, office culture, communication, leadership—and over time, I became fascinated with them. I discovered I had a natural aptitude for some of these things, and studying them reinvigorated me. Making the choice to change my perspective and broaden my horizons saved my career and improved my quality of life.

Now, as a professional coach, I see how much of an epidemic burnout is in our industry. I'm contacted weekly by dentists who feel stuck, exhausted, worn down, and hopeless in their careers. Some think the secret sauce is buying their own practice; others want to sell and work for someone else, believing that will remove all their burdens. Either way they know that what they're doing isn't working well.

I also network with other coaches who deal with this epidemic

every day, and none of us see it easing up anytime soon. In fact, more coaches are entering the field specifically to help dentists through these challenging times. Some even focus on helping dentists pivot to other industries, catering to those who want to give up on the profession completely.

In all my conversations with dentists and other coaches, common patterns emerge that indicate why burnout and hopelessness are so prevalent:

- **Lack of control:** Dentists don't feel in control of their schedules, responsibilities, or the work they do. They also don't feel in control of their teams. To many, it seems like staff members have more control over the practice than the doctor.
- **Overwhelm and paralysis:** I hear "I feel stuck" and "I don't know what to do" more now than ever before. Dentists often feel paralyzed by the stress of their current situation, which leaves them afraid to make choices or worried that the ones they've already made were wrong.
- **Trust erosion:** Dentists tell me that their patients don't seem to trust them as much as they used to. They say team members don't trust them as much either. Some of this lack of trust is real, and some of it is just perceived; either way, the environment inside many dental offices feels less collaborative and more cautious.

What's happening is a confluence—almost a perfect storm—of factors that have made being a dentist tougher than it's ever been.

This is coinciding with a generation of young dentists that reports lower personal confidence and self-esteem, more dissatisfaction with their personal and professional lives, and lower overall quality of life than previous generations.

“Gen Z are the loneliest, least resilient demographic alive today,” explains psychiatrist Stuart Lustig. “No other generation feels less connected, less autonomy over their future, more unfocused when it comes to life, and reports worse quality of life and greater hindrance due to their mental health.”¹

Meanwhile, dentists later in their careers have either had enough time to figure things out or they come from a generation that developed stronger skills for handling adversity earlier in life—or both. This brings us to the second major problem facing dentistry today: generational gaps.

GENERATIONAL GAPS

Older dentists tell me that when they observe younger dentists, they often think, *They just don't get it. They haven't developed strong dental skills yet. They're coming out of school unprepared, and they're just not great at interacting with people.*

Younger dentists tell me that older dentists aren't embracing new technology and don't know what they're doing anymore. They explain that older dentists struggle to deliver what they, as newbies, consider to be superior and modern dental care.

While there is a bit of truth to these claims, they are shortsighted. They don't tell the full story. This fosters a lack of collaboration and leads to misunderstandings between the generations, tearing at the fabric of our profession in the process.

The truth is that there are indeed differences among the generations, and we can't pretend that doesn't create challenges in the workplace. But what we can do is better understand these differences and explore how we can help, and learn from, one another.

According to Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, to get a job, young adults now need more education, and more prior work experience, than were required of previous generations. This, along with higher educational debt, leaves young adults accumulating less wealth than the generation before them.²

Baby boomers and Generation Xers entered adulthood with more job stability and more affordable housing than millennials and Generation Z. However, those younger generations enjoy more career flexibility and more technological conveniences than their predecessors.

Older adults have also lived most of their lives with fewer digital distractions, meaning they have generally spent more time socializing in person, reading, attending community events, and gathering with family. On the other hand, younger adults tend to value experiences more than material possessions, meaning they spend more time and money traveling, dining out, and using digital devices.³

Millennials, especially women, are better educated than prior generations, but they also experience delays in getting married and/or establishing their own households. And that reputation for switching jobs frequently? It's not entirely true. Millennials are just as likely to stick with an employer as Gen X workers were when they were the same age.⁴

On top of these generational differences, the industry itself has changed dramatically within the last fifty to sixty years.⁵

- Dental implants, once rare and specialist-only, are now mainstream and a core part of general practice. They've shifted the focus from preservation and restoration to extraction.
- Zirconia and lithium disilicate have replaced metal-based crowns and bridges. Today, approximately 90 percent of restorations are ceramic, not metal.
- The rise of digital impressions, in-office milling (CEREC), and 3D printing has revolutionized workflow, accuracy, and patient experience.
- Emphasis on sealants, fluoride, and regular cleanings has shifted the focus from "drill and fill" to prevention.
- Digital x-rays, which are faster, clearer, and lower in radiation, have largely replaced x-rays on film.
- Sedation dentistry is more widespread, making care more accessible and comfortable for anxious patients.
- Enhanced sterilization techniques, personal protective equipment (PPE), and other precautions have dramatically improved infection control.
- The rise of DSOs and corporate dentistry means solo private practice is no longer the default.
- Similarly, a dentist who owns their own practice is no longer the norm. In 1980, approximately 90 percent of

dentists owned their practice. Today, it's closer to 73 percent and falling.

- Dental students are now more than 50 percent female and more racially and ethnically diverse than ever before.
- The complexity of dental insurance has made practicing dentistry less financially reliable for many dentists and their teams.
- Dental school curricula are more focused on evidence-based care, technology, patient communication, and practitioner mental health, but they often fail to adequately prepare dentists for the business, leadership, and financial realities of modern practice.

Regardless of whether they perceive these changes as good or bad, dentists from older generations need to understand that the challenges they faced in their career are not the same as those their younger colleagues must now manage. Today's new dentists must contend with not only a rapidly changing industry but also the following realities:

- **Lengthier maturation process:** Research from Jean Twenge's *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us* reveals that “contrary to the prevalent idea that children are growing up faster than previous generations did, iGen'ers are growing up more slowly: 18-year-olds now act like 15-year-olds used to,” with

delays in starting romantic relationships, becoming sexually active, obtaining their driver's licenses, and beginning their professional journeys.⁶

- **Less prepared for adult responsibilities:** This extended adolescence means today's dentists are likely entering the workforce less prepared for employment, financial responsibilities, and independence. As Twenge notes, "with iGen's less likely to work, manage their own money, and drive in high school, perhaps they are not developing the resilience that may come from doing things on your own."⁷
- **A mental health crisis:** Twenge's research also shows individuals belonging to iGen are reporting elevated instances of depression, heightened anxiety, and a greater sense of isolation. She found a 50 percent rise in the manifestation of depressive symptoms among teenage girls between 2012 and 2015, coupled with an almost twofold increase in the number of first-year college students who indicate experiencing depressive feelings.⁸
- **Less equipped to handle stress:** This mental health crisis directly impacts professional fortitude. The generation entering dentistry today is less equipped to handle the inherent stresses of caring for patients, managing staff, and making difficult business decisions.
- **A culture of safetyism:** *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt describes young people who've been "raised in a culture of safetyism, which teaches them to stay 'emotionally safe'"

while protecting them from every imaginable danger,” possibly creating a “feedback loop” in which “kids become more fragile and less resilient, which signals to adults that they need more protection.”⁹

- **Poor conflict resolution skills:** The result is a generation that believes they are psychologically fragile, that they should always trust their feelings, that emotional discomfort is the same as physical danger, and that people who disagree with them are enemies.¹⁰ In turn, they are “asking for more protection and adult intervention in their affairs and interpersonal conflicts.”¹¹
- **An erosion of trust:** The First and Second World Wars brought to light the importance of dental care, earning dentists of the mid- to late twentieth century the public’s trust and respect.¹² Now patients come in armed with information from a myriad of googled articles or YouTube videos, some of which are misleading. They may assume dentists are just trying to take their money, or they struggle to accept treatment from a younger dentist who possibly looks and speaks differently from them.
- **Less interest in practice ownership:** More young dentists want to be employees rather than own a practice. According to recent data, practice ownership rates have declined from 85 percent in 2005 to 73 percent in 2023, with early-career ownership rates much lower for recent graduates.¹³
- **An expectation of comfort and convenience:** Because working from home is now common, “the idea of getting

dressed in business attire, commuting to an office, and staying there for eight hours five days a week sounds exhausting to many” young professionals.¹⁴ They want their jobs to be flexible, convenient, and comfortable with workplaces that encourage them to be their “authentic selves,” supervisors who regularly affirm and applaud them, and meaningful work that is valuable to society.

Today’s up-and-coming dentists have many cards stacked against them. The confluence of factors—increased mental health challenges, delayed maturity, reduced resilience, communication difficulties—creates unprecedented challenges for a generation that’s simultaneously less equipped to handle them.

My goal is to teach younger dentists the skills, techniques, and mindset needed to navigate these problems and thrive in the dental industry of today—and tomorrow. But this isn’t just about helping the next generation; it’s about the survival of dentistry as an independent profession. The next generation will either carry the torch of professional independence and small business ownership, or dentistry will be swallowed up by corporations like what has happened in medicine.¹⁵

DEBT

The financial difficulty new dentists face is staggering. The average student loan debt for dental school graduates is \$312,000—and that’s just dental school debt.¹⁶ When you factor in undergraduate debt, some graduates owe over \$700,000 total.

Here's how the numbers add up:

- Annual tuition at public dental schools averages \$46,845 for in-state students and \$79,168 for out-of-state students.¹⁷
- Private dental schools charge an average of \$90,090 per year.¹⁸
- Over four years, total costs are about \$227,639 at public schools and \$396,303 at private schools.¹⁹
- These figures don't include instruments, equipment, books, clinical supplies, or other fees, which add another \$20,000 to \$30,000 per year.²⁰

As if these numbers weren't high enough, at the time of publication, interest rates for new federal loans are 7.94 percent for Direct Unsubsidized Loans and 8.94 percent for graduate PLUS loans.²¹ At these rates, debt compounds quickly.

In my coaching practice I see how the debt burden amplifies the stress levels of risk-averse younger dentists. They're already wired to seek safety and security in just about everything they do—a generational characteristic we discussed above. Combined with crushing debt loads, this makes them even more tentative when presented with opportunities to take risks, such as owning their own business.

When facing \$3,000 to \$5,000 in monthly loan payments, the income variability that comes with practice ownership feels untenable. In fact, only 21 percent of dentists graduating between 2016 and 2020 are practice owners in their early career, compared to 63–70 percent of earlier generations at the same career point.²² The guaranteed paycheck that comes with being an employee, even

at a lower long-term earning potential, becomes the only option that makes financial sense in the short term.

But when it comes to debt, being an employee isn't without its challenges. I see it create significant conflicts during employment negotiations. Younger dentists feel they need a relatively high minimum income level to service their debts and keep up with the rising cost of living. The problem is that they often don't yet have the skills to justify these salary expectations.

This creates a fundamental disconnect: The employer sees a new graduate with limited experience demanding high compensation, while the young dentist sees an entry-level salary that's inadequate for their basic financial needs. Both perspectives are valid but incompatible, leading to frustration on both sides.

What's particularly insidious is how this debt creates "golden handcuffs." Young dentists become trapped in employment situations that may not align with their values or long-term goals simply because they need the guaranteed income to pay off their loans. They can't afford to take the income dip that often comes with starting a practice, even though practice ownership typically leads to higher long-term earnings and professional satisfaction.

This isn't just about money, though—it's about professional identity and autonomy. When a dentist is paying \$3,000 to \$5,000 per month in student loans, every career decision becomes filtered through debt service.

Want to take time off? Can't afford it. Want to be selective about patients? Can't afford it. Want to invest in continuing education or practice improvements? The debt payments come first. Debt may even push graduates to maximize their income by avoiding specializations, by entering private practice, and by working longer hours, regardless of personal preference.²³

The psychological toll of all of this is immense. The stress of large debt loads affects well-being and delays personal development, reinforcing the preference for stable employment over entrepreneurial risk.

This can lead to a lack of dentistry jobs as a whole: Because graduates favor safer, lower-earning employee positions over owning a practice, they avoid creating new jobs for other dentists. When current owners wish to retire or sell, there aren't enough younger dentists able and willing to take up the mantle, meaning existing practices don't create new jobs either.

UNDERPREPAREDNESS

No profession exists for which a person can be completely prepared before they start their career. Every industry requires on-the-job training to some extent. Even graduates from the best colleges and universities will have more to learn once they start working because nothing can be a true substitute for real-world experience.

That said, today's dental school graduates are often underprepared for what they will face in practicing dentistry, which makes those early years harder than they need to be. In a study of new dental professionals in Australia, respondents "regarded clinical experience during training as too limited, making new graduates somewhat unprepared for practice and postulated there was insufficient hands-on training throughout the program."²⁴

Study participants also felt at least somewhat unprepared for—

- managing medical and dental emergencies;
- treating dental trauma;

- identifying and reporting neglect, abuse, or violence;
- discussing difficult or sensitive topics (e.g., substance abuse, domestic violence, eating disorders, etc.) with patients;
- treating patients with special needs;
- interacting with culturally and linguistically diverse populations;
- navigating ethical challenges.

But it's not just clinical experience that graduates often lack. Let's look at other areas in which new dentists tend to be underprepared.

- **Job searching:** New dentists often think that successfully graduating from dental school guarantees a job, but in reality, securing that first job is usually harder than expected. Graduates have to “put in the work to research and reach out to a fair number of practices before [they] land that dream job.”²⁵
- **Building trust:** Patients and staff don't automatically trust a practitioner right out of dental school. New dentists will need to start from scratch to build trust and credibility, regardless of how skilled and capable they are.
- **Work efficiency:** In school we have ample time to work on a tooth. No one expects us to be fast. But in a clinical setting, patients rarely have time to spare. They have to get back to work or go pick up the kids, so they run out of patience quickly. Young dentists have to work faster than

they're used to, and it requires practice to increase speed without sacrificing quality or safety.

- **Continuing education:** Much to the chagrin of some graduates, dental school isn't the end of learning. Gerald Botko, president of the Academy of General Dentistry, says, "dentistry is constantly changing, with new innovations appearing on the horizon daily, such as new methodologies; more advanced, simpler, faster, and more accurate techniques; better, easier-to-use, and stronger materials; and new technologies . . . A great dentist must embrace new advances in order to continuously deliver superior care to their patients."²⁶ New dentists often don't realize they'll need to take continuing education courses regularly throughout their careers.
- **Mentorship:** Too many new dentists try to go it alone when they first start out, but this often leads to unnecessary hardship. "If I could go back to when I first finished dental school, I wish I understood the value of dental mentors and being a part of a dental community. It can be intimidating transitioning from a learning institution where you always have a support team to being out on your own in your first job," Sara M. DiNardo, DMD, says.²⁷ Every dentist can benefit from mentorship, but it is especially important for new graduates.
- **Patient Anxiety:** Dental anxiety is a real issue. According to one study, 61 percent of patients are afraid of going to the dentist.²⁸ More often than not, the person in the chair is nervous about being there, and many new dentists underestimate how much this can impact dentist–patient

relationships, as well as patient comfort, honest communication, and overall quality of care.

Perhaps the most significant area of underpreparedness for new dentists is the business side of practice. Whether we like it or not, business and administrative tasks are a large part of the job, even if we don't own a practice. These tasks include marketing and advertising, scheduling appointments, billing patients, filing insurance claims, managing staff, troubleshooting technology issues, answering phone calls, and more.

According to Chin Park of Orange Park Dentistry, “a dental office is more than dealing with patients. You have to manage your entire staff. There are many different personalities in a dental office, and it is your job to manage and motivate them. This can really overwhelm new dentists who really didn't think this would be a part of the job.”²⁹

The extent to which a dentist functions as a leader in the office varies from practice to practice. But by the nature of the role and the title of doctor, staff and patients view the dentist as someone with authority, and they expect the dentist to effectively manage the responsibilities that come with it.

Right alongside the business aspects of dentistry are the sometimes-conflicting financial interests of various parties. In the first few years of practice especially, young dentists can often find themselves caught between their obligations to patients and obligations to employers. For example, an interviewee in the Australian study explained that some young graduates say they've done certain things they shouldn't have, but they did so because they felt pressure from their bosses.³⁰

The pressure to maximize profit or appease supervisors can

strain new dentists who don't yet have the clout to stand up for themselves or their patients. Many dentists today find themselves in corporate environments that "prioritize profits over patient care" where they're pushed for higher and higher productivity, adding stress to an already demanding job.³¹

CONCLUSION

The lap dance experience I had with Anne sent me a clear message: Being a dentist is less about practicing dentistry and more about the people I work with each day. It's less about all the skills and techniques I learned in dental school and more about the relationships I develop with others.

As I watched Anne courageously step outside every comfort zone she'd ever known, I learned something profound about dentistry and about life. She didn't let the expectations about what an eighty-year-old should or shouldn't do limit her reality. She embraced the beautiful unpredictability of being human and created an experience that still makes me smile decades later.

That's exactly what we need to do with our dental careers. The problems we've explored—burnout and hopelessness, generational gaps, debt, and underpreparedness—aren't character flaws or personal failures. They're the predictable result of a large disconnect between what we expected dentistry to be and what it actually is. The stress doesn't come from the challenges themselves. The stress comes from the collision between our expectations and reality.

But here's the thing: Once you understand that dentistry is more like making an omelet than baking a cake, once you accept that it's a people profession, once you stop fighting the reality and

start working with it—everything changes. You have the power to address these problems in your own career and shift your own narrative. You can choose to—

- see the unpredictability of patient interactions as adventures rather than obstacles;
- embrace the creative, improvisational nature of dentistry instead of fighting for the precision you thought you signed up for;
- build the relationships and communication skills that will serve you far better than perfect clinical technique alone;
- recognize generational differences as opportunities to learn rather than as sources of frustration;
- view your debt as an investment in a profession that, despite its challenges, still offers incredible opportunities for independence, service, and financial success;
- understand your underpreparedness as normal and expected, rather than as evidence of your inadequacy.

You don't have to pretend the profession is something it's not. You don't have to fight against the challenges or wish they were different. You can work with the reality of modern dentistry and create something beautiful—a career that serves others, provides for your family, and gives you the autonomy and independence that drew you to this profession in the first place.

You have the power to write your own story in dentistry. You can choose to be the victim of unmet expectations, or you can

be like Anne—courageous enough to face reality, step into the unknown, and create something uniquely yours.

Reflection Questions

- Where are you most likely to experience burnout, and what warning signs can you watch for?
- What do you admire most about other generations of dentists, and how can you incorporate those qualities into your own practice?
- How can you reframe your current challenges as opportunities for growth, rather than as roadblocks to success?
- What would your dental career look like if you stopped fighting reality and started working with it?
- What's one small step you can take today to shift your narrative from victim to author of your own professional story?