

Prioritizing dental assistants' health using the Well-Being Index

In dentistry, it is said we measure precision in millimeters and success in patient smiles. But how often do we measure the well-being of the people behind the mask and gloves?

It is no secret that Dental Assisting is a stressful occupation. The pressures of long hours, physical demands of working chairside, time constraints on rapid room turnovers, sterilization/infection control and the emotional drain of anxious patients can quietly build into stress and burnout. You love your job, but have you ever felt drained before your day even began? Maybe brushed it off as "just being tired"? Until one day, you realize something is 'really' wrong.

Tija Boyd Hunter wrote in a *Dental IQ* article that "burnout sneaks up on even the most dedicated team members – the hard workers who take pride in their work and go above and beyond to do whatever it takes to help, the team members who help everyone, and those who come in early and leave late."

Burnout isn't just about being tired after a long workday — it's a **three-part syndrome** of emotional exhaustion, cynicism/detachment, and reduced personal accomplishment Psychology Today. How many of us reach a breaking point only to wonder how long this has been going on? How many of us would think about tracking our 'off' days? You are not alone. But tracking your mental health is a proactive way to understand your emotional patterns, detect early warning signs, and support long-term well-being. You do not have to have a diagnosis - anyone can benefit from regular self-monitoring. www.pheno.health

In an effort to support the mental well-being of all dental professionals, the American Dental Association (ADA) has expanded free access to the ADA's licensed version of the Mayo Clinic's Dental Well-Being Index (WBI) to all dental professionals including **dental team members**. The Well-Being Index is an online self-assessment tool invented by Mayo Clinic that measures across 6 dimensions of distress and well-being in just 9 questions. ADA extends Well-Being Index to dental team members | American Dental Association

This access really matters to **dental assistants** and other dental team members because unless you work for a DSO, large practice, government, federal services or non-profit, chances are you do not have a workplace wellness package as an employee benefit. It was not until the late 1970's that dental practices started to consider wellness packages and only in the mid 2000's that workplace wellness became a strategic priority. And with 2026 seeing them as a standard part of modern dental office culture. Wellness Dentistry Network The **Dental Well-Being Index (WBI)** can be a strong standalone employee wellness benefit because it directly supports mental health, which is linked to positive habits and overall wellness.

What is the Well-Being Index and the ADA Connection

It is important to understand what the Well-Being Index is to appreciate its value and impact on dental team members. Mayo Clinic researchers created the WBI over a decade ago to address a critical gap in measuring clinician well-being. The leadership recognized existing workplace surveys were too long, cumbersome, and often focused narrowly on burnout. They also lacked anonymity, immediate resources, and comprehensive reporting tools. About | Mayo Clinic Well-Being Index for Healthcare

Their goal was to develop a simple, anonymous, and rapid assessment that could:

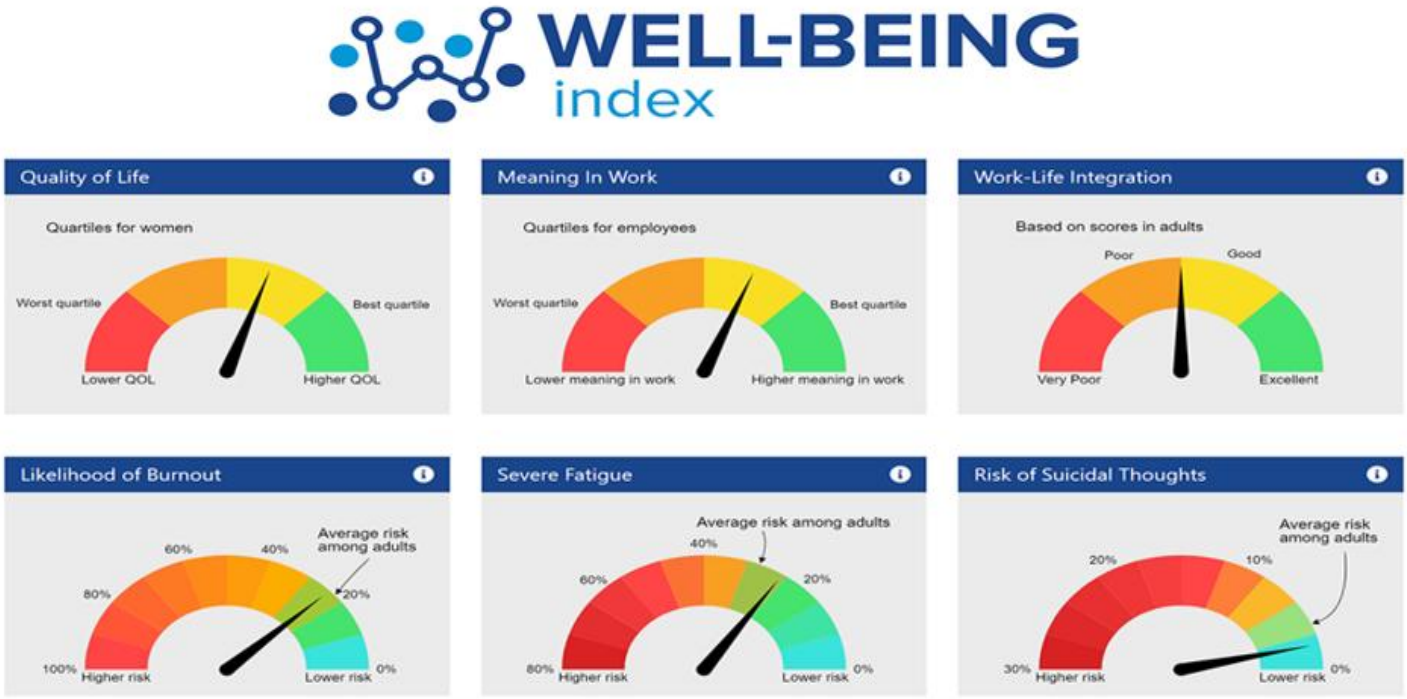
- Measure multiple dimensions of distress and well-being in under a minute.
- Predict risk of distress across **six** dimensions (e.g., burnout, fatigue, suicidal ideation, quality of life, meaning in work, work-life integration).
- Provide immediate access to customized resources.
- Offer administrators comprehensive, longitudinal data to track progress. About | Mayo Clinic Well-Being Index for Healthcare

After years of research, internal use and rigorous validation, the 9-question WBI tool was finally launched as a clinically validated self-assessment, later licensed to MedEd Web Solutions for distribution to other organizations. It is used by over 1,000 organizations worldwide and is 100% anonymous. About | Mayo Clinic Well-Being Index for Healthcare

Key features:

- Simplicity – 9 questions taking under a minute to answer.
- Accessibility - Web-based.
- Anonymous and Secure – The assessment is **100% anonymous**, with individual responses, scores, and data never shared with institutions. Data is stored securely in cloud servers and only provided to administrators in **de-identified aggregate format**. Users may use personal email addresses, and usernames are never revealed to organizations.
- Rapid assessment – provides immediate access to customized resources. It goes beyond traditional burnout assessments to provide a holistic view of well-being.
- **Tracks** well-being overtime. About | Mayo Clinic Well-Being Index for Healthcare

It is ***not a diagnostic tool,*** and it will ***not label you with a condition***, but it does provide you with a snapshot of your current risk level for burnout, fatigue, and other wellness concerns.



Well Being Index | American Dental Association

ADA's Adoption and Licensing

Though the Mayo Clinic's WBI was originally developed for physicians, it has since been adapted for multiple healthcare roles to include dentistry. The ADA has used the WBI since 2023 when they first piloted it with a small cohort of wellness ambassadors and in 2025 expanded access to all team members. The ADA-licensed version directly connects participants to resources from the ADA and over thirty state dental associations. Users can continue to take the index at a selected frequency and reference results on their own personal dashboard. ADA extends Well-Being Index to dental team members | American Dental Association

Why It Maters for Dental Assistants and the Documentation

The Mayo Clinic's creation was a response to the growing recognition that clinician burnout and distress are systemic issues affecting patient care. You find daily entries on social media acknowledging that assisting is taking "a serious toll on my mental health to the point of just getting out altogether." The Dental Assisting National Board found that about one in five dental assistants left their jobs in the previous year. It is a striking turnover rate, and it reflects the cumulative effect of all the stressors previously described plus more. https://www.danb.org/career-center/dental-assistant-salary

Especially interesting is the *Mayo Clinic's 2025-2026 Annual State of Well-Being in Health Care Report*. Each year, they analyze tens of thousands of Well-Being Index assessments across many healthcare professions to create the State of Well-Being Report — a comprehensive look at key trends, risks, and opportunities for healthcare. The 2025 report is built on data from **over 72,000 assessments** completed between January 1 and December 31, 2025. In the subsection **Report by Practice Type**, Dentistry was broken down into Dentist, Hygienist, and Dental Assistant.

Key insights:

- Hygienists – Distressed and Struggling at 59.5%
- Dental Assistants – Distressed and Struggling at 53.6%
- Dentists – Distressed and Struggling at 43%

The report continues: "This inversion — where the highest-credentialed role experiences the least distress — highlights that support roles in dental practices bear a disproportionate burden. This is one of the most notable findings in dentistry: the highest emotional hardening rate of any group (49%) coexists with support staff facing even greater challenges… Well-being strategies for dental teams should consider the distinct experiences of hygienists and assistants rather than treating the dental team as a single group." Dentist | State of Well-Being 2025

How to Use the Well-Being Index

1. **Access:** Go to the ADA.org/wellness or the WBI signup page https://www.ada.org/resources/practice/wellness/well-being-index using the code "ADA Wellness".
2. **Complete** the Assessment: The WBI consists of **nine simple yes/no or slider-scale questions** and takes **less than one minute** to complete. You can retake the assessment every 1–3 months to track changes in your well-being over time and understand how specific events affect your mental health.
3. **Review** your results: You will receive a score indicating your relative risk level compared to your dental professional peers.
4. **Resources:** Based on your results, the tool will suggest resources, from stress management tips to counselling services.
5. **Repeat Regularly**: Wellness is not static. Checking in monthly or quarterly can help you track your changes and trends and see if your sell-care strategies are working. Well Being Index | American Dental Association

Benefits for You and Your Practice

- **Self-Awareness**: You understand your stress levels before they escalate.
- **Early Intervention**: Access resources before burnout impacts your health or performance.
- **Confidentiality**: Your results are private – **no one** in your workplace sees them unless you choose to share.
- **Culture of Wellness**: When dental teams use tools like the Well-Being Index, it sends a message that mental and emotional health are valued. Wellness | American Dental Association

Conclusion

Our role as a dental assistant is vital to patient care – but you cannot pour from an empty cup. The Mayo Clinic's Well-Being Index offers a simple, evidenced-based way to check in with yourself, help you identify risks, and connect with support. By making **your** well-being a priority, you are not only protecting your health, but you are also ensuring that you can continue to bring your best self to your patients, your team, and your career.

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