

Battling and Beating

THE DEMONS OF DENTAL ASSISTING

*How every dental assistant
can have an amazing,
fulfilling career*

KEVIN HENRY, M.A.

Battling and beating the
demons of dental assisting

Chicago Midwinter Meeting
February 21, 2026

by Kevin Henry
kevin@kevinspeaksdental.com

The famous kiss...

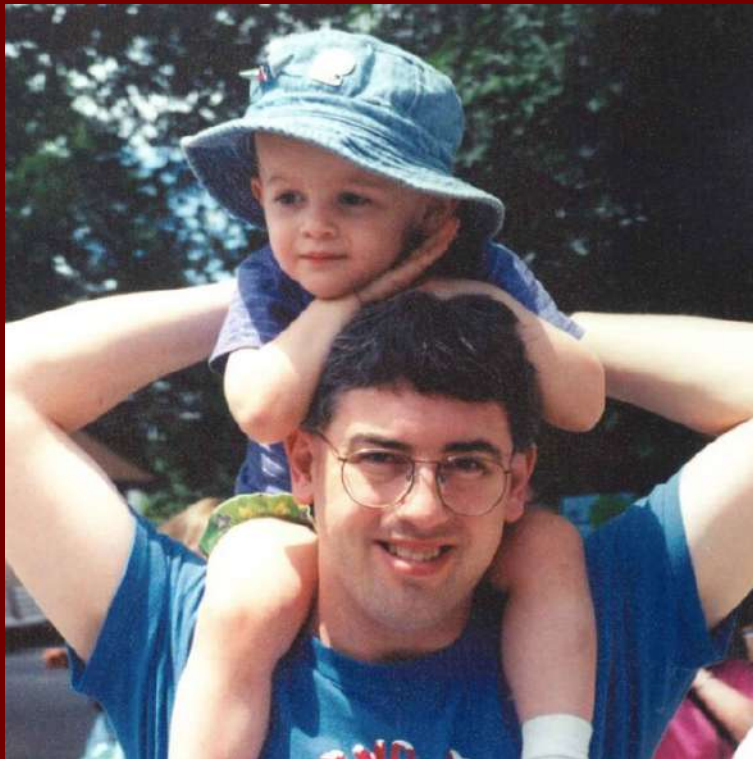


So why are you here?

- “In order that people may be happy in their work, these three things are needed: they must be fit for it; they must not do too much of it; and they must have a sense of success in it.”

-- John Ruskin

What's your why?



What's your why?



THE points of the day

- You control your own happiness. If someone else controls how happy you are, you have a problem.
- You control your own success.
- I hope you can make dental assisting not just a job, but rather a passion and a career.
- Don't be an island.

THE points of the day

- Being a dental assistant isn't just a job ... it's a daily challenge that requires skill, patience, and resilience.
- Every day, assistants battle unseen "demons" that can make or break their career. But with the right mindset, these challenges can be conquered.

THE points of the day

- Here's how to take control and become a BOSS in your role.



Let's meet the original demons!

- Lack of pay
- Lack of respect
- Getting along
- Feeling like it's "just a job"

Let's meet the current demons!

- Feeling undervalued
- Stress and overload
- Anxiety of patients
- Low pay
- Back and neck pain
- Office drama and toxic workplaces
- "Doing it all" syndrome
- Difficult bosses
- Burnout and fatigue
- Self-doubt

The daruma



Bought state



Draw one of daruma's blank eyes with wishing.



If your wish has come true, draw another blank eye.

Demon #1: Feeling undervalued

- **The battle:** Many assistants feel overlooked, as if they're "just an assistant."



Demon #1 – Feeling undervalued

The truth...

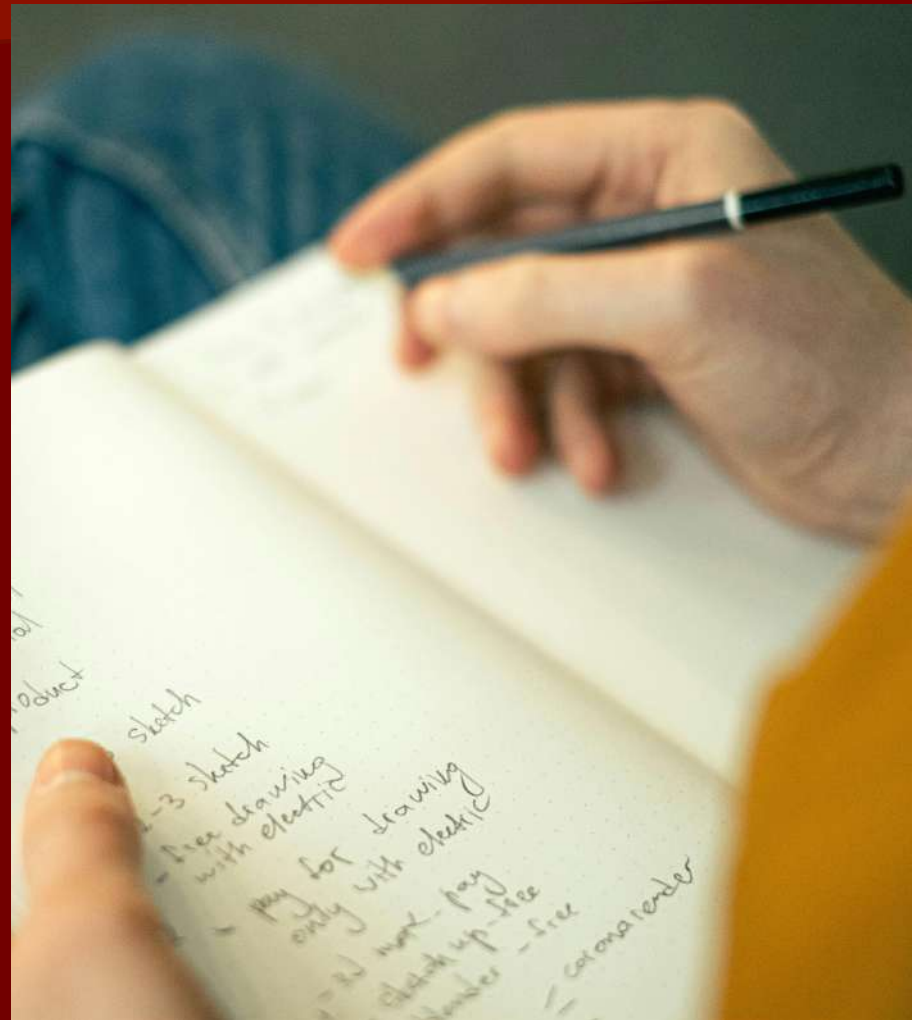
Dental assistants are the backbone, soul and heartbeat of the practice.

Demon #1 – Feeling undervalued

How to conquer it:

- Know your worth! Your skills keep the office running smoothly.
- Speak up — advocate for recognition and fair compensation.
- Keep growing — continuing education can elevate your career and demand for your skills.

Remind yourself of your value



Demon #1 – Feeling undervalued

- You are never, ever “just a dental assistant.”

Demon #2: Stress and overload

- **The battle:** Juggling multiple tasks, handling emergencies, and keeping up with a fast-paced office can be exhausting.



Demon #2: Stress and overload

The truth:

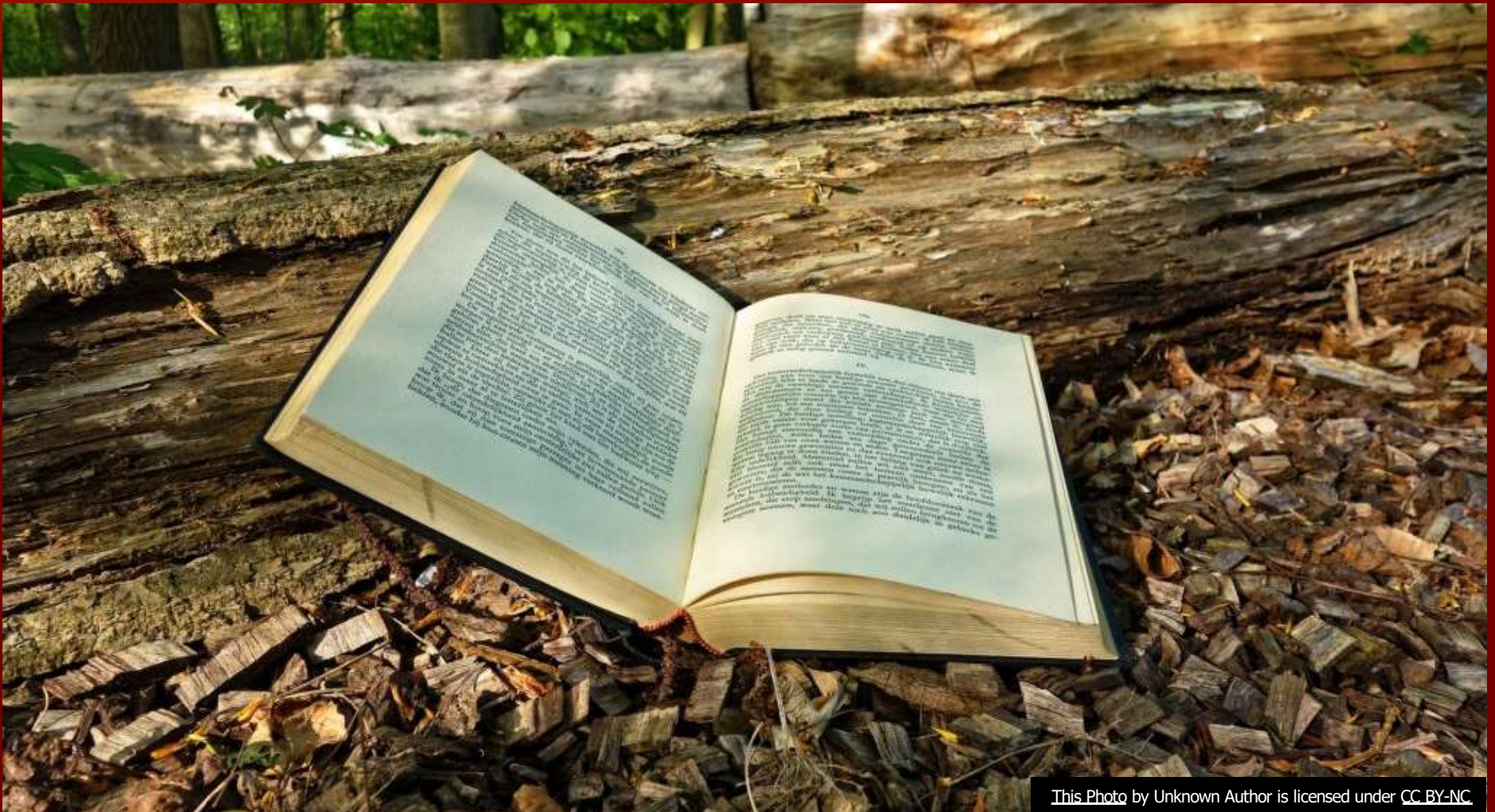
From managing back-to-back patients to sterilizing instruments and handling difficult situations, stress is an everyday reality.

Demon #2: Stress and overload

How to conquer it:

- **Stay organized** — Use checklists and prioritize tasks.
- **Breathe** — When things get hectic, take a moment to reset.
- **Communicate with your team** — A smooth workflow reduces stress for everyone.

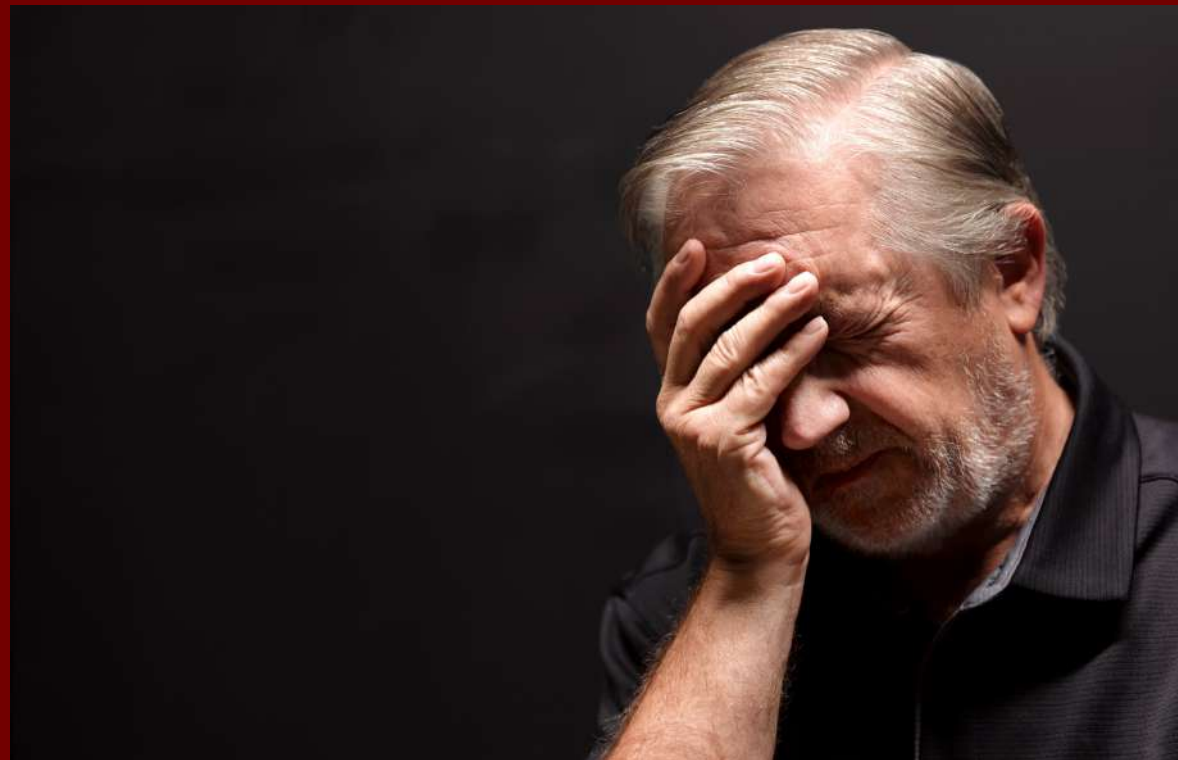
The story isn't over



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-NC](#)

Demon #3: Patient anxiety

- **The battle:** Nervous patients can project their fear onto the dental team, making interactions challenging.



Demon #3: Patient anxiety

The truth:

Many patients are terrified of the dentist, and their fear often translates into stress for the assistant. Some may be rude, uncooperative, or in distress.

Demon #3: Patient anxiety

How to conquer it:

- Use **calming techniques** — Speak in a reassuring voice and explain procedures in simple terms.
- **Empathize** — Remember that fear can make people act out.
- Develop **thick skin** — Don't take a patient's anxiety-driven behavior personally.

Be the bartender



Understanding the customer



Emilio
understood
the
assignment



Demon #4: Low pay

- **The battle:** Many assistants struggle with feeling underpaid despite their essential role.



Demon #4: Low pay

The truth:

Many dental assistants feel underpaid despite their essential role in the practice.

Demon #4: Low pay

DO YOU FEEL FAIRLY COMPENSATED?

**CERTIFIED DENTAL
ASSISTANT**

YES

\$29
PER HOUR

NO

\$25
PER HOUR

**DENTAL ASSISTANT,
NOT CERTIFIED**

YES

\$25
PER HOUR

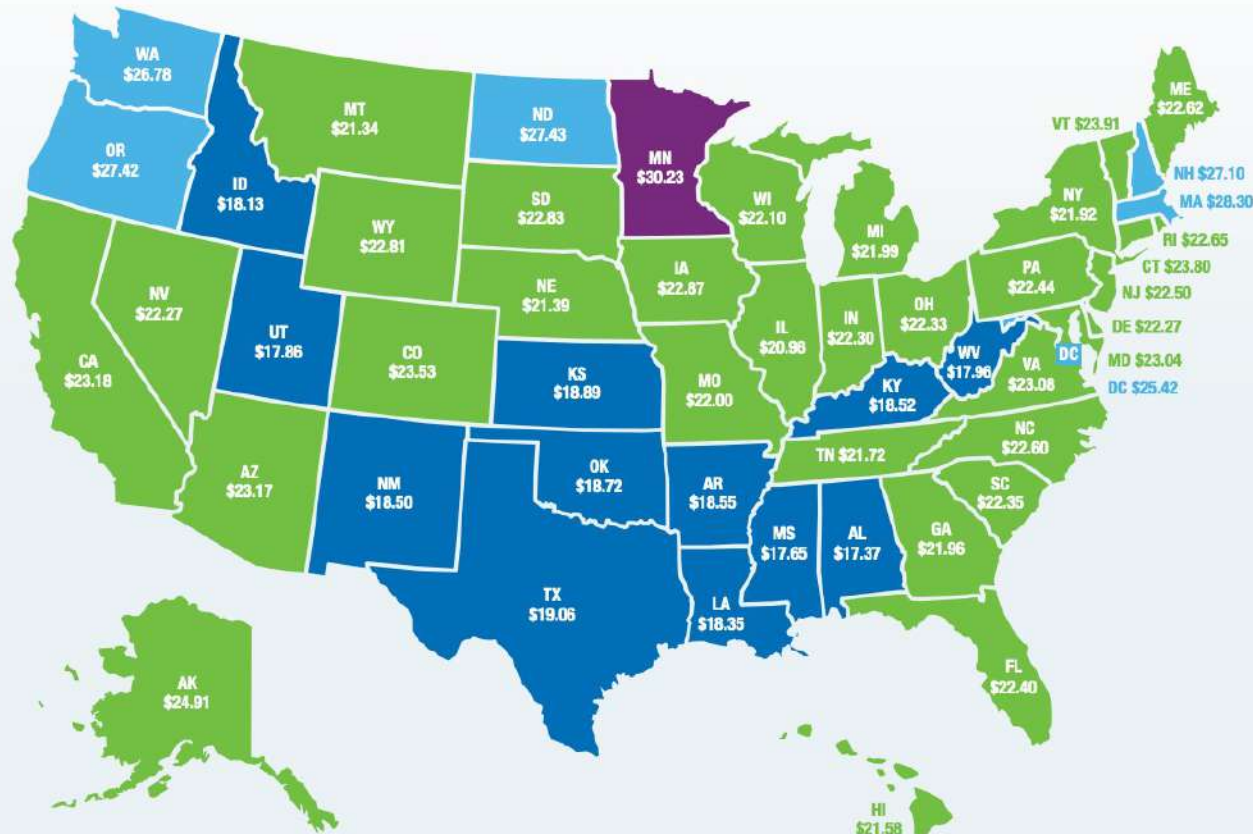
NO

\$21
PER HOUR

Demon #4: Low pay

DENTAL ASSISTANT, NOT CERTIFIED*

Dental assistants who are not certified also see their wages vary by state.



*Figures from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics for all dental assistants.

Demon #4: Low pay

Certified Dental Assistants' wages can vary depending on state.

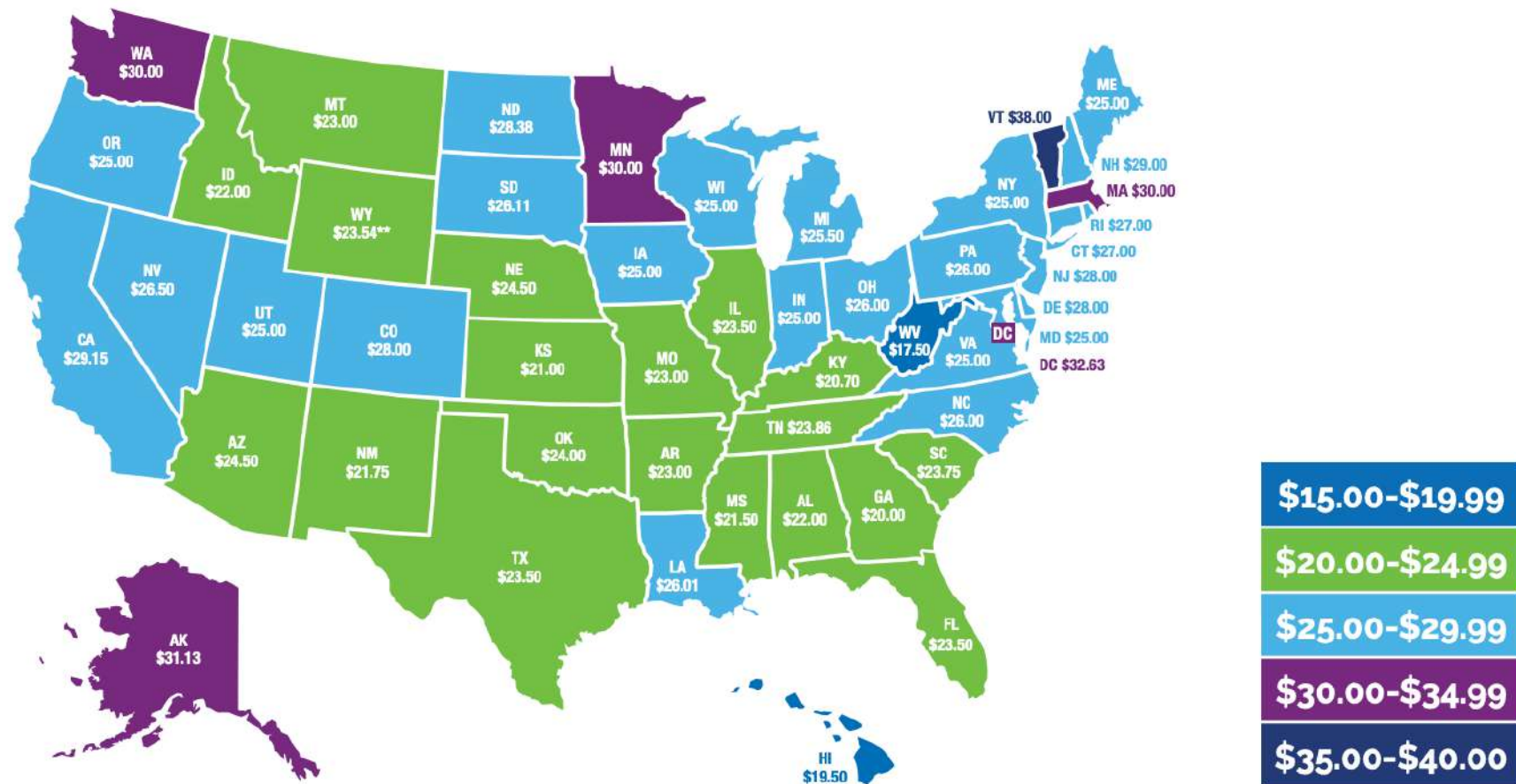


**Figure for this state based on 2020 data.

Demon #4: Low pay

How to conquer it:

- Get certifications in expanded functions (X-rays, coronal polishing, etc.) to increase earning potential.
- Consider negotiating your salary — Highlight your skills and experience.
- If your current office isn't valuing you, explore new opportunities.

The critical equation to salary in the practice

- 25% of one's merit increase is based on ATTITUDE
- 25% of a merit increase is based on the employees' scope of responsibility
- 25% of the merit increase is based on the employee's performance evaluation, which is done three ways — doctor's evaluation, self-evaluation, and peer review.
- The most important 25% that impacts the other three is the health of the practice in the past 12 months.

Truth about salaries



Inequality in salaries



Demon #5: Back and neck pain

- **The battle:** Long hours of bending, twisting, and hunching over can take a toll.



Demon #5: Back and neck pain

The truth:

Long hours of bending, twisting, and hunching over can take a serious toll on a dental assistant's body.

Demon #5: Back and neck pain

How to conquer it:

- Practice proper ergonomics — Adjust chair height and posture frequently.
- Stretch daily to prevent stiffness and chronic pain.
- Invest in supportive shoes — Your feet take a beating too!

Time to stretch



Demon #6:

Office drama and toxic workplaces

- **The battle:** Gossip, negativity, and workplace cliques can make the job miserable.



Demon #6:

Office drama and toxic workplaces

The truth:

Every office has some level of gossip, favoritism, or negativity that can drain energy and morale.

Demon #6:

Office drama and toxic workplaces

Why we gossip:

- To socialize
- To validate our own insecurities
- To emotionally vent

Demon #6:

Office drama and toxic workplaces

Five steps to slowing down gossip

- Have a gossip buddy
- Catch yourself
- Notice the aftertaste
- Don't rush to judgment
- Try a one-day gossip fast

Demon #6:

Office drama and toxic workplaces

How to conquer it:

- Stay professional — Avoid engaging in gossip.
- Set boundaries — Focus on your job, not office politics.
- If the toxicity is unbearable, don't be afraid to leave. A healthy work environment is key to career happiness.

Demon #6: Office drama and toxic workplaces

60%

OF DENTAL ASSISTANTS SAID THEIR
CURRENT WORK ENVIRONMENT
WAS VERY FRIENDLY

41%

OF DENTAL ASSISTANTS SAID THEY
HAVE EXPERIENCED HOSTILITY OR
ABUSE AT WORK

42%

SAID THEIR CURRENT
WORK ENVIRONMENT WAS
VERY RESPECTFUL AND
VERY COOPERATIVE

55%

OF DENTAL ASSISTANTS SAID THEIR
PRACTICE HAS A STATEMENT ON
VALUES OR CULTURE FOR EMPLOYEES,
WHILE 24% WERE NOT SURE.

Demon #6: Office drama and toxic workplaces



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-SA](#)

Demon #7: “Doing it all” syndrome

- **The battle:** Many assistants wear multiple hats — chairside, sterilization, front desk, and more!

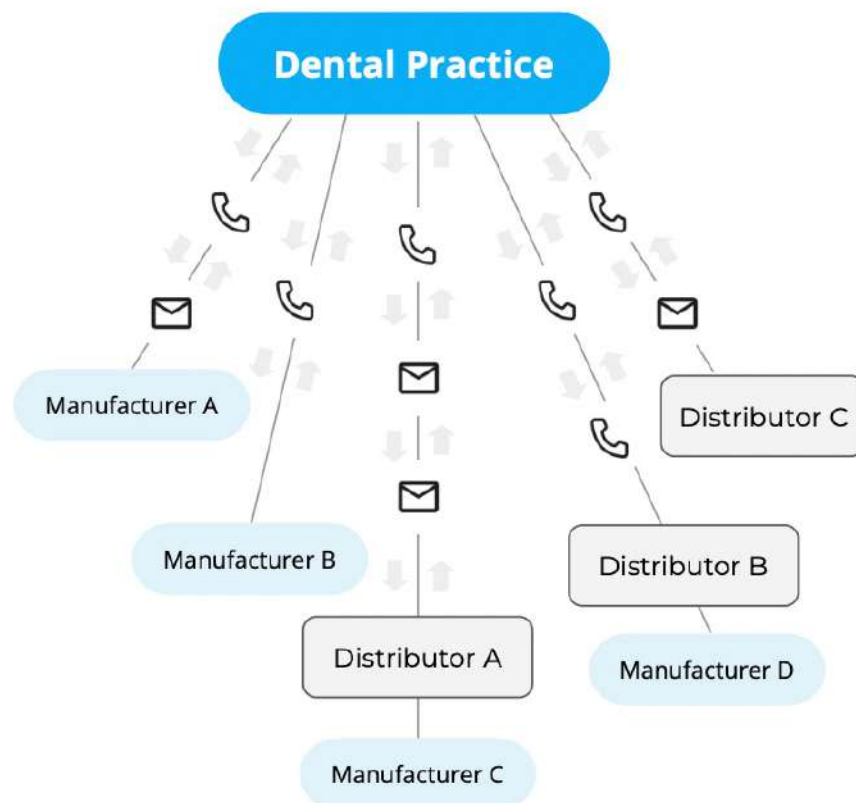
Demon #7: “Doing it all” syndrome

The truth:

Dental assistants juggle countless tasks — sterilization, charting, taking X-rays, assisting procedures, ordering supplies, and more — often without enough help.

Demon #7: “Doing it all” syndrome

Supplies ordering is overly complicated and time consuming.

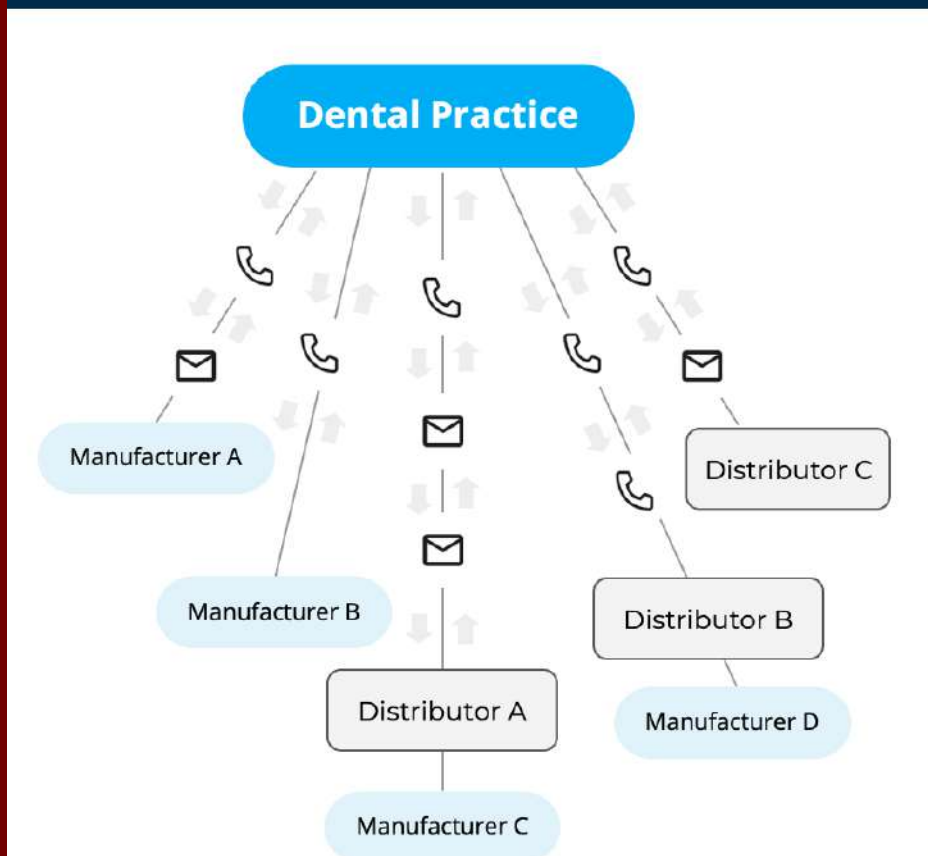


Common Supply Challenges

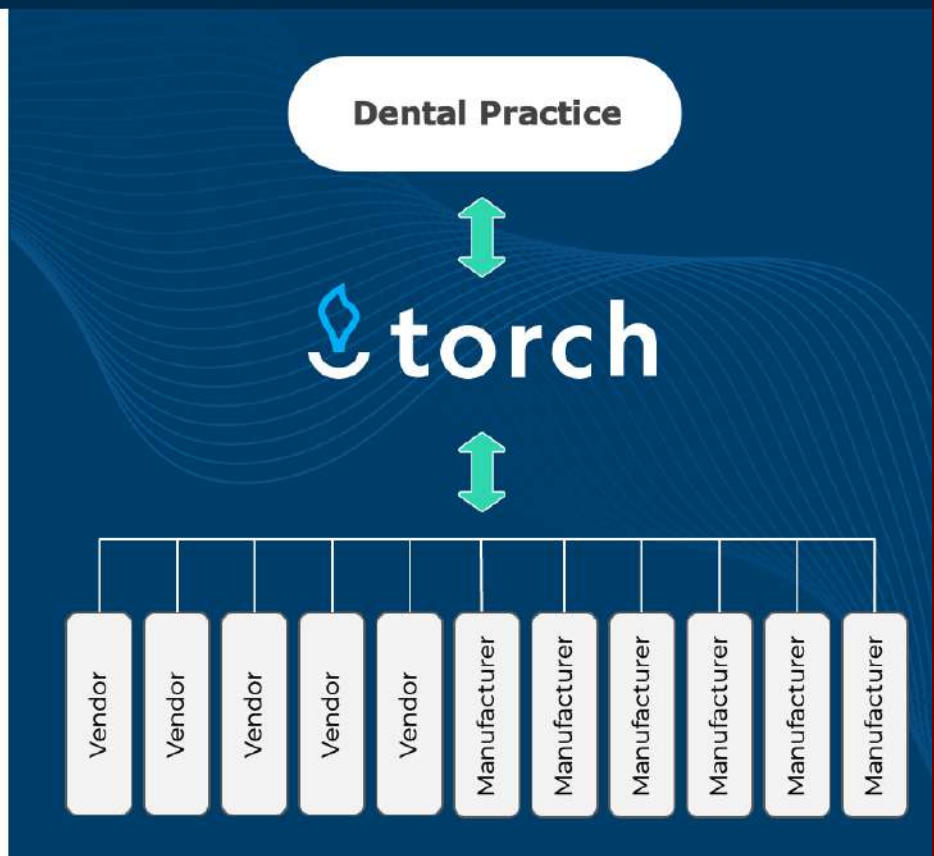
- Product availability / Backorders
- Overpaying for supplies
- Shopping multiple vendors
- Managing spend, invoices, and payments across multiple vendors
- Unreliable customer service
- Staff Turnover / Delegating Responsibilities to Staff

Demon #7: "Doing it all" syndrome

Current process



A new way of thinking



Demon #7: “Doing it all” syndrome

How to conquer it:

- Delegate where possible — Teamwork makes the dream work!
- Speak up if you’re overloaded — Your concerns matter.
- Learn to say "no" to unreasonable expectations.

Demon #7: “Doing it all” syndrome



Demon #8: Difficult bosses

- **The battle:** Some dentists are demanding, impatient, or poor communicators.

Demon #8: Difficult bosses

The truth:

Some dentists are demanding, impatient, or have poor communication skills, making the work environment stressful.

Demon #8: Difficult bosses

The personality clash:

They have a personality that is very different from your own or clashes with yours. In this category, we have bosses who are disrespectful, lone wolves who prefer to work alone, workaholics, and the know-it-all boss.

Demon #8: Difficult bosses

The poor leader:

They have a work style that doesn't allow you to thrive and grow. For instance, bosses with poor leadership skills, who micromanage or demand too much, and those who pick favorites.

Demon #8: Difficult bosses

How to conquer it:

- Stay calm and professional — Don't match their negativity.
- Anticipate their needs — Preparation can prevent frustration.
- If the situation is toxic or abusive, consider finding a new office that values and respects you.

Demon #8: Difficult bosses

If you're changing practices:

- Interview the interviewer to make sure you're getting a good boss

A true thought?

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

- A person who feels appreciated will always do more than is expected

Settle it like the Dutch?



Leadership pizza



Demon #9: Burnout and fatigue

- **The battle:** Long hours, emotional labor, and physical strain can lead to exhaustion and burnout.

Demon #9: Burnout and fatigue

The truth:

Long hours, emotional labor, and physical strain can lead to burnout, exhaustion, and loss of passion for the job.

Demon #9: Burnout and fatigue

How to conquer it:

- **Take breaks** — Even a few minutes to breathe can help.
- **Find balance** — Avoid letting work consume your entire life.
- **Remind yourself why you started** — Helping people smile is a powerful reason to stay motivated!

Demon #9: Burnout and fatigue

Remembering magic moments:

- What are the best parts of your day?
- Who are the patients who make you smile?
- Who are the coworkers you can lean on?
- Are you a 10 today?

Just passing this along...

if you're having a bad day... here's a
smiling alpaca



The Angel Oak



The Angel Oak



Demon #10: Self-doubt

- **The battle:** Many assistants question their skills and struggle with confidence.

Demon #10: Self-doubt

The truth:

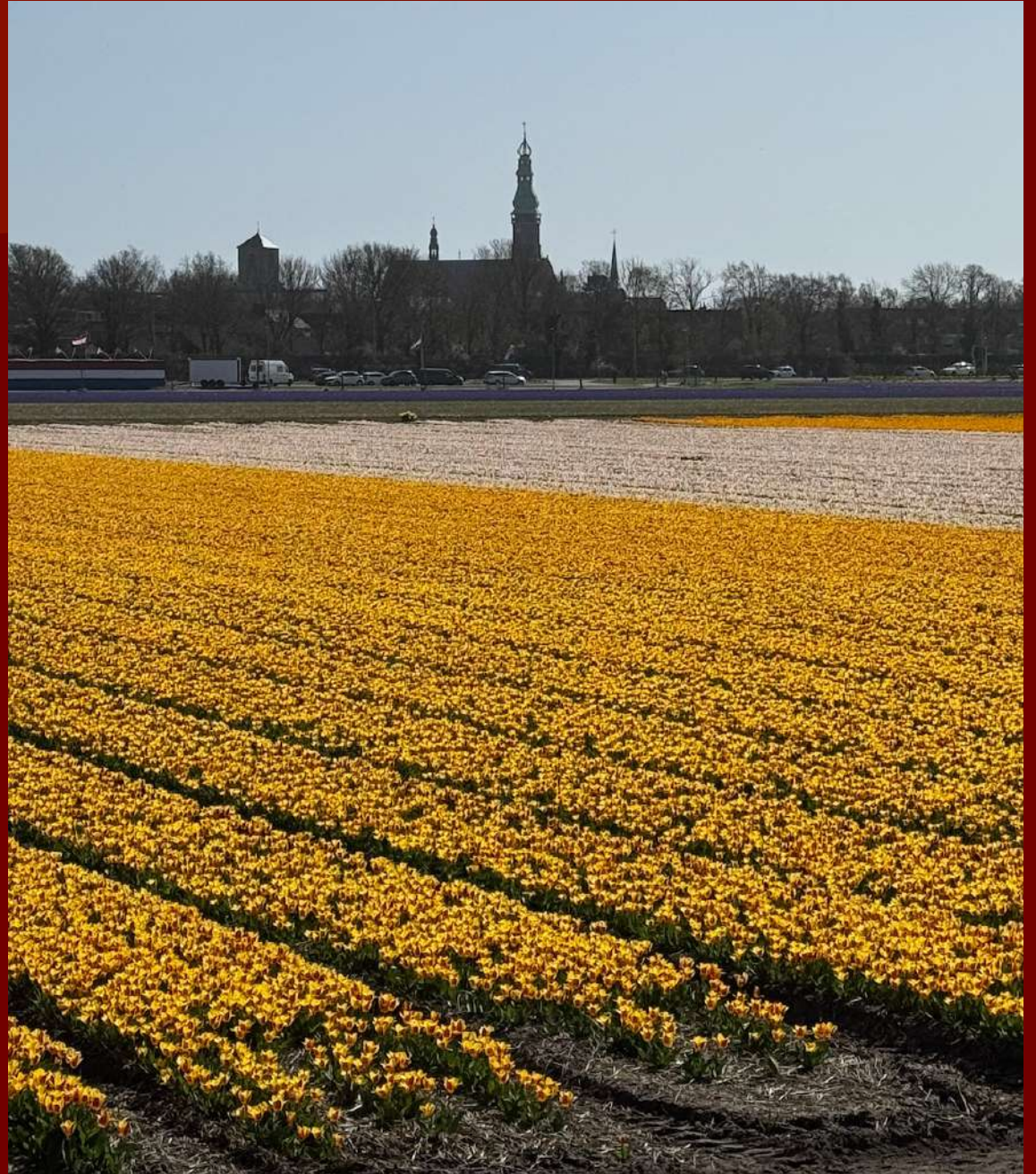
Many assistants feel unsure of their skills, second-guess themselves, or struggle with imposter syndrome.

Demon #10: Self-doubt

How to conquer it:

- **Trust yourself** — you've trained for this!
- **Keep learning** — the more knowledge you gain, the more confident you'll be.
- **Remember your impact** — you're a crucial part of every patient's care and every dentist's success.

The lesson of the tulip



John Cena's two watches



But wait ... there's more ...



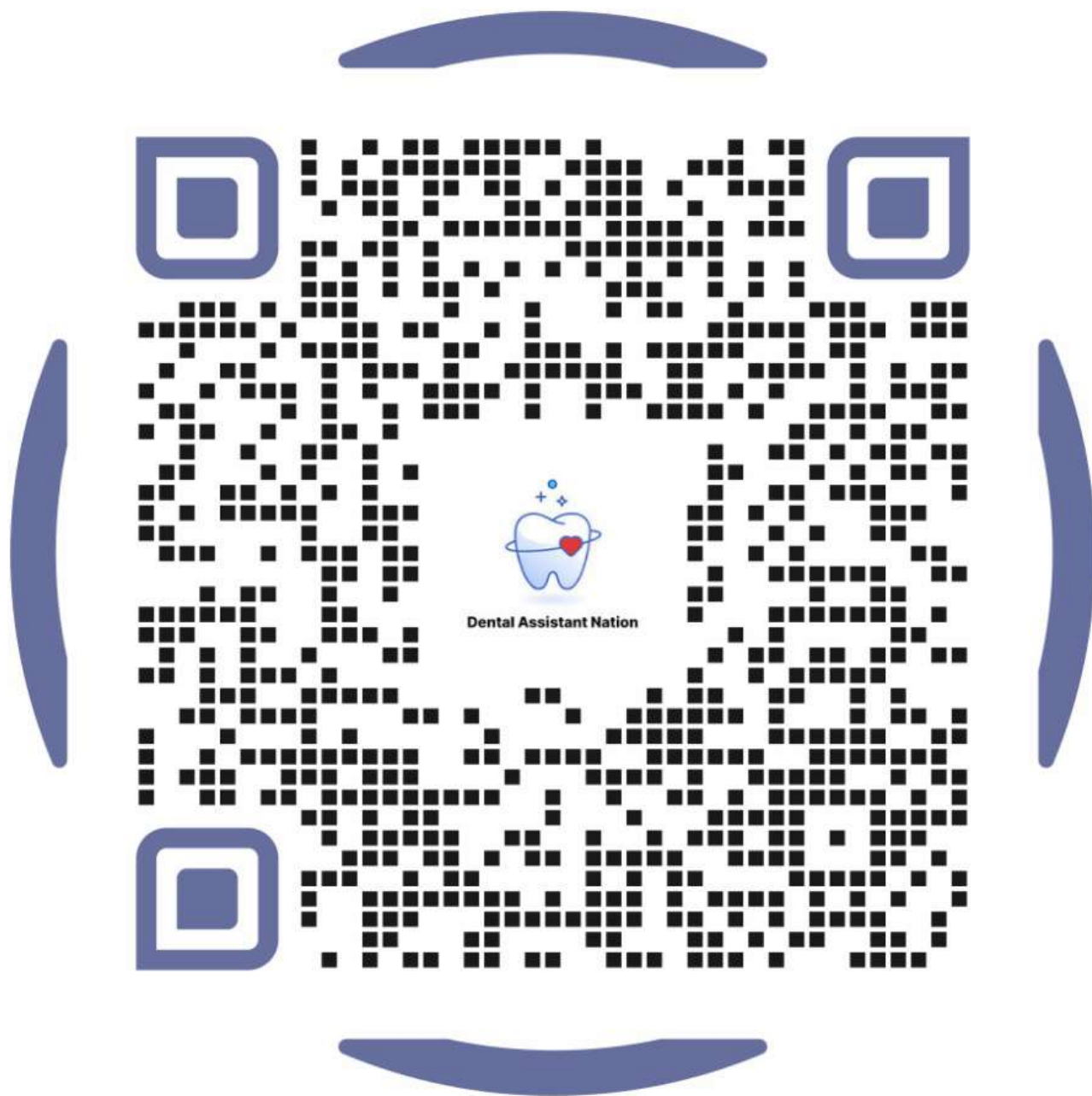
Dental Assistant Nation

Be curious



Join me at booth 4623





Beat the demons.
You can do it.

Thank you for your
time and attention!

Any questions, please contact me at
kevin@kevinspeaksdental.com