

Dentists receive confidential support for alcohol, chemical dependency through CDA's Well-Being Program

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In conversation with Matthew Korn, DDS, Well-Being Committee chair

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Quick Summary:

The CDA Wellness Program assists dental community members who suffer from alcohol or chemical dependency or both. But dentists have additional stressors to contend with during the pandemic, so the program is evolving to become a referral source for dentists who are coping with stress and burnout.

Note: The CDA Well-Being Program referenced in this article is now called the CDA Wellness Program. The name change took effect June 24, 2021. The program's mission remains the same.

"There are people in my community who will tell you that the Well-Being Program is probably the most important benefit they've received as a CDA member," said Matthew Korn, DDS.

Last May, Dr. Korn co-presented the confidential webinar [“Coping with Chemical Dependency During COVID-19.”](#) CDA hosted the webinar, and it was open to all CDA members. Near the start of the webinar, he offered a statistic: In the first month of the pandemic, sales of alcohol increased 50%. Alcohol and drug-related hospitalizations are now up 30%. A [research letter published in JAMA Network Open](#) last September looked at the recent change in alcohol use and its consequences.

“There can’t be a reduction in the disease expression when there’s an increase in consumption of the thing that causes it,” Korn said, noting that while Alcoholics Anonymous and other recovery support meetings weren’t operating, access to alcohol was unrestricted.

The fear and isolation of the pandemic, Korn says, creates the perfect breeding ground for the disease of addiction to take hold, while shame and fear of professional repercussions, particularly among health care providers, discourage individuals from seeking help.

“We’re treated differently in the recovery world by our peers because we have health care licenses and we are expected to not get the diseases that other people get because of that,” Korn said.

As chair of the [CDA Well-Being Program](#), which assists dental community members who suffer from alcohol or chemical dependency or both, Korn said dentists have additional stressors to contend with during the pandemic: Have they become unemployed or laid off staff? Are they able to pay their employees? How has social isolation contributed to disease or impacted providers’ overall sense of wellness?

For these reasons, the Well-Being Program is evolving to become a referral source for dentists who are trying to cope with stress and burnout.

“These are the human elements that we’re fighting against, and it’s never been more difficult than right now for dentists who need help or for our committee to offer that help,” Korn said.

Three practicing dentists share their stories

Korn himself battled alcohol dependency from his college years and into his early years practicing dentistry, although by his own words he was “born an alcoholic.” He later developed prescription-opioid dependency.

“It got worse and worse over the course of 15 to 20 years, so it wasn’t a single event — it wasn’t a one-time light bulb that came on where I realized I needed help,” he said. “And for years I remember thinking I was too smart to succumb to this disease. Obviously, I was proven wrong.”

Eventually, enforcement officers with the Dental Board of California’s Diversion Program showed up at his dental practice with badges and guns.

“I thought my life was over,” Korn said.

He and his webinar co-presenters, all practicing dentists, shared their unique but similar stories — similar most appreciably in that all three dentists’ stories “end” positively, with each maintaining their license, never ceasing practice and emerging from their different recovery programs and treatment centers with insight, new tools and confidence.

Korn participated in the dental board’s program, but CDA members today can participate in CDA’s Well-Being Program as an alternative.

“Every single dentist who has successfully completed a recovery contract with CDA Well-Being reports that their lives are not only better than before, but better than they thought possible,” Korn said. “We are here to serve patients and to help dentists recover their lives and livelihoods with proven, effective support.”

He said recovery doesn’t happen by simply going to AA meetings. “It happens by going deep inside ourselves and looking at the things that make us want to drink or abuse other substances. And that’s what the treatment is about as well as what the support systems afterward are about.”

Intervention and support; local components are also a referral resource

The two primary purposes of the CDA Well-Being Program are to perform interventions and provide support following successful treatment.

Typically, the committee chair in one of the program’s five California regions receives a call from a concerned spouse or significant other or the dental office manager. Executive directors of component dental societies also receive calls. Most of the calls Korn receives are from executive directors who have spoken to a struggling dentist or a dentist’s loved one.

The call launches an investigative process wherein the Well-Being Committee seeks confidential firsthand knowledge of the dentist’s behavior. If they have enough valid information to perform an intervention, the intervention follows.

“The only goal of an intervention is to open something up in a person,” Korn said. “But we then make a recommendation, which is simply to accept referral to a medical professional who does an assessment.”

Each regional Well-Being Committee has an established relationship with a team of medical professionals who perform the assessment. That assessment would indicate abuse, dependence or missing coping mechanisms. The Well-Being Program always follows the

recommendation of the medical assessment team and implements after-care programs to help dentists continue their journey to healthy living. For health care professionals, 90 days of treatment is typical.

‘I want dentists to know they’re going to get confidential support’

“For years, I could hear a little voice within me that told me I was slowly killing myself,” Korn said. “But every morning when I woke up that voice was gone, and by noon I was already thinking about what I was going to consume to make that voice go away again. Most likely there are dentists out there in this beautiful state of ours who have a quiet voice within them that knows they have a problem.”

Korn hopes that other dentists who hear that quiet voice will listen to that voice, pick up the phone and contact the chair of their regional Well-Being Committee knowing there’s an experienced and compassionate soul on the other end.

“I want dentists to know that they’re going to get confidential support and be allowed to stay in their practices and they’re going to get the help they need. Dependence is treatable.”

If you believe someone has an alcohol or chemical dependency problem, contact CDA or a [regional Well-Being Committee near you](#) for confidential assistance.

Feedback

Was this resource helpful?