

SMILE

DENTAL ANXIETY

by Dr. Brid Hendron

One of the primary reasons most people avoid visiting the dentist and receiving dental care is dental anxiety. Whether this stems from a previous bad experience, something they have watched on TV, or listening to horror stories from others, the result is they avoid visiting the dentist. They usually attend the dentist only when they require treatment. In many cases this will follow an episode of pain, worry and sleepless nights. In addition patients often lose their appetite or cannot eat with the discomfort and hence are drained when they attend. I think we would all concede everything seems ten times worse when we haven't had a proper sleep; our pain threshold and tolerance are both compromised. This is not the best emotional or physical state to approach a challenging situation, the situation appears even more difficult and the anxiety becomes entrenched. Patients often feel helpless and become trapped in their fear.

Dental fear is extremely common. It is estimated that between 5 and 15% of the population describe having a dental fear. The majority of people find a dentist who is sympathetic, work through their concerns and overcome their fear. One positive dental experience is often all that is required to conquer unnecessary anxiety. In some cases these fears progress into a full blown "phobia". Patients with phobias often cannot even attend a dentist and will endure endless pain and distress without seeking treatment. They can experience profound anxiety when simply reminded of the dentist such as watching advertisements or overhearing a

conversation about dentistry. Thankfully most dental fears do not ever develop into a full phobia. Dentistry has changed dramatically in the last two decades. A genuine effort has been made by the profession to become more patient friendly.

The privatisation of many dental services has had the effect of ensuring that patient's requirements and customer service are at the forefront of dentist's minds. Advances in techniques and equipment, anaesthetics and materials ensure it is now easier to deliver dentistry in a pain free fashion.

What are the reasons for dental anxiety?

I work predominantly with nervous and anxious patients. Below are a few of my most frequently encountered causes.

- Previously painful or negative experiences during a dental visit. This can be many years ago. A negative experience can be emotional and does not have to be physical. It can include feeling embarrassed or stupid in front of a dentist or other dental team members.
- Hearing and storing negative dental experiences belonging to other people we know.
- Finding difficulty with being in "someone else's hands", feeling like you are "not in control" of the situation. Feeling "helpless" or "vulnerable."
- A sense of shame or disgrace at the condition and health of your mouth. Fearing you may be ridiculed, reprimanded or laughed at by the dental team.
- Negative experiences you have created or observed while reading books or watching films. For example where dental treatment has been torturous or barbaric - an inability to detach this from reality
- Catastrophic concerns about your condition, for instance that it may be cancer or HIV.
- Recurring thoughts or dreams of having all your teeth removed and walking around toothless.

In addition some dentists, like myself, have made working with nervous and anxious patients an integral part of their practice. We offer options such as the use of lasers instead of drills, a range of anaesthetic options, relaxation techniques in addition to listening carefully to each individual concern. The standards of care and options open to nervous patients in particular have definitely improved. This is very good news if you suffer from dental anxiety. You are not trapped with your fear, there are solutions.

Symptoms of dental anxiety

Again these are many and varied. Here are a few you may recognise if you or someone you know suffer from dental anxiety.

- Feeling nervous long before your visit is due.
- Finding excuses or reasons to avoid attending or cancel your visit.
- Fractionated sleep, appetite shifts and mood swings prior to the visit.
- An obsession with listening to and sourcing information which confirms that going to the dentist is indeed a nightmare although you know this is not useful.
- Physical symptoms often include sweating, heart racing and in severe cases feeling faint.
- Difficulty in concentrating as your appointment approaches.
- Experiencing nausea or diarrhoea on the morning of the appointment.
- An inability to think clearly, speak your mind or listen to any of the dental team.
- Behaving in a fashion unlike ones normal self often involving rude and demanding behaviour. Treating the dental team with disdain resulting in feeling positively ashamed of yourself afterwards.

Begin to dissect out your fear.

How can I help myself?

Find a dentist who enjoys working with patients with dental anxiety to overcome their fear. Ask friends and family for recommendations. Tell the receptionist that you are anxious and that appointments are difficult for you and assess their response. Sympathetic dentists will usually have sympathetic staff. Good communication is crucial. Ensure therefore when you do arrive that you feel listened to. It is your responsibility to tell the dentist what your fears are and this is infinitely more effective than your dentist guessing what your fears might be. You need to help us to help you.

Other useful tips include...

Begin to dissect out your fear. Many people say they are afraid of the dentist or dentistry while actually it is one aspect which is the source of your fear perhaps the needle or the drill. It is easier to navigate one fear than an entire collection.

Make an appointment for a simple examination when you are not in pain. Tell your dentist exactly what your concerns are even if you feel they are ridiculous or that they may be surprised. As a dentist I can assure you it is easier, by far, to treat someone who is not anxious. Most dentists love to hear what they can do to put you at ease for instance using a stop signal if you like to stay in control. Perhaps using a laser if you find the noise of the drill difficult. This allows your dentist to get through future appointments easily and to do a good job.

Train yourself to become interested in positive dental anecdotes. Talk to people who do not have a problem going for treatment. Avoid the temptation to compound your concerns by borrowing other people's negative experiences and storing them as your own. Even if it were the case that 15% of the population have concerns about dental treatment there are still 75% who do not. You must know some of them! Explanation and clarification of any dental treatments or options proposed is your right as a patient. If you have a question about a particular treatment please ask! If you are unclear or need time to come to a decision then ask for all the information you need, take it home and decide before your next visit.

Decide how you would like to pace your treatment. Decide how much or little work you would like to have at each visit so that you can grow in confidence. Tell your dentist what is a reasonable pace for you as an individual.

Set your embarrassment aside. Dentists essentially fix problems. We are solution focused. It is merely a matter of assessing what can be done to give you back your smile. Once we have established the current situation we are automatically focused on future options. We are delighted to work on mouths where we can make a real difference. Feel proud of the fact that you have finally taken the situation in hand and are keen to change.

Learn to relax. Practice relaxation breathing techniques and positive visualisation techniques. These can then be used to remain calm in the run up to treatment and to relax during treatment.

Can people who have a complete phobia of the dentist overcome their problems?

The good news is yes! It is totally possible. It often involves the support of an additional therapist such as cognitive behavioural therapist. However some dentists like myself are qualified in NLP and hypnosis and use this in the first instance to help decrease the intensity of the fear and its connection with dental procedures. Once this has been adjusted I then gradually reintroduce you to a dental environment. Many people who suffered previously with phobia are now attending for routine care in the normal fashion.

If you are reading this and have a fear or phobia then I would encourage you to take control of the situation. We are now aware that dental disease has more impact on our general health than we were previously aware. Therefore improving your oral health will have a positive impact on your general health. The impacts on your psychological well being are immediate. The boost to confidence and self esteem I witness repeatedly in patients is a true privilege to observe. Imagine how you might be different if you had a healthy mouth, fresh breath and a smile you could engage happily...

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