

Coping skills for facing dental fears



We all have something we are afraid of—spiders, the dark, heights, maybe even going to the dentist. Sometimes, you can avoid scary things. You do not like heights? Stay close to the ground. But seeing the dentist is one fear you should not dodge. Here are some things you can do to help you get to the dental office and through the appointment:

- **Speak up.** Let the office know that you are anxious. Tell the receptionist when you book the appointment, and tell the staff members when you arrive. And most importantly, tell your dentist. Let him or her know what makes you nervous or if you have had a bad experience in the past. It is especially important to let the dentist know if you have felt pain before. Sometimes patients experience unnecessary pain even though they have been given a local anesthetic. They often do not say anything for fear of upsetting the dentist or because they are embarrassed, but a larger dose of anesthetic at the beginning of treatment often works better than trying to give more once the treatment starts.

- Talk to the team about the coping skills that have worked for you in the past and those that you would like to try. Also, ask to start with simple, shorter appointments if possible.

- Do not be afraid to ask questions. Some people worry about what is going to happen before and during the procedure. If you are curious, ask the dentist what the treatment involves or to briefly explain as you go along.

- Agree on a signal you can give—like raising your hand—if you need to take a break during treatment.¹

- **Distract yourself.** You have a lot of options for distracting yourself to help take your mind off the treatment.

- Bring headphones and some music or an audiobook to listen to;

- Occupy your hands by squeezing a soft stress ball or playing with a fidget toy;

- It may sound silly, but go to your happy place. Try imagining yourself someplace else. It might help you escape your surroundings and stay calm¹⁻³;

- Ask your dentist about other options that might help.

- **Breathe.** Deep breathing brings oxygen into your body, helping slow your heart rate and relax your muscles. You can practice deep breathing anywhere—on the way to the appointment, in the waiting room, or in the

chair before treatment begins. There are number of different breathing exercises that may help. For example, you can try breathing in deeply while counting slowly to 5. Hold your breath for a second. Then, sigh or exhale slowly. Do this for 4 or 5 breaths.¹ Deep breathing exercises can even be performed when you're not facing an appointment. That way, when you have 1 scheduled, you'll be better prepared. (Note: If you have a medical condition, you may want to talk to your physician about whether these or other physical exercises are right for you or if they should be modified to give you better results.)

- **Get in tune with your body through relaxation.** It may sound backward, but sometimes you can relax by tensing your muscles first. One way is to slowly move from one muscle group to the next before treatment begins, tensing the muscles in each group for 5 to 7 seconds then relaxing for 20 seconds.¹ Four sample muscle groups are:

- feet, calves, thighs, and buttocks;
- hands, forearms, and biceps;
- chest, stomach, and lower back;
- head, face, throat, and shoulders.

This exercise also might be something you could practice before your appointment, so that when you need it, you will be ready to fully experience the benefits. (Note: If you have a medical condition, you may want to talk to your physician about whether these or other physical exercises are right for you or if they should be modified to give you better results.)

These are just a few coping techniques. Work with your dental team to develop a plan that not only gets you in the door, but keeps you coming back for visits on a regular basis. ■

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“For the Patient” provides general information on dental treatments. It is designed to prompt discussion between dentist and patient about treatment options and does not substitute for the dentist’s professional assessment based on the individual patient’s needs and desires.

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