

News Release

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Who's Afraid of the Dentist? Overcoming Dental Phobias

About 80% of people in North America have some form of anxiety about dentists. The majority overcome their fears and go to a dentist anyway. A small number of people are actually phobic – their anxiety is so intense it is debilitating and they can't seek any kind of dental treatment even if their problem is severe.

“Modern dentists know many ways to make nervous patients comfortable,” says Alberta dentist Dr. Christine Botchway. “We explain a procedure well, and make sure the patient both understands and agrees to what is proposed. Communication is two way; the patient is directly involved. In essence, we form a dentist-patient partnership.”

Dental anxiety usually stems from a negative childhood experience. Botchway and her colleagues have heard adults tell of having teeth drilled and filled without anesthetic, being ignored when they complained of pain, being restrained - even slapped. There was little or no communication, no explanation of what was happening and why, and a feeling of vulnerability, lack of choice and loss of control.

“This would never happen today,” said Botchway. “Dentists are trained to actively involve patients in their treatment and modern technology makes most dental procedures pain-free.” Alberta dentists must also adhere to practice standards set by the Alberta Dental Association and College that include good communication and individual choice.

“Though experience is the most dominant cause of dental anxiety, a second source is transference - people with the condition negatively influencing others,” said Botchway. “Children can sense the fear when a parent with anxiety speaks about dental visits. Parents need to be very careful not to pass their anxiety on to their children.”

The good news is that dental anxiety is a learned behaviour and as such, can be unlearned. Empathy and two way communication from the whole dental team from the front receptionist to the dentist can both recognize and support the nervous patient. An anxious patient may not say what's wrong, but can show their discomfort by saying nothing or by being rude and abrupt.

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“People don’t want to admit they’re afraid, especially if they think the fear is irrational,” says Botchway. “In a first visit with a new patient, I may spend up to an hour going through their concerns and, if needed, adjust the treatment to compensate. I re-enforce that support every time I see them. With each positive visit, the power of their anxiety is lessened.”

Some adjustments that dentists may make:

Fear of needles - administer anesthetic with a computerized wand instead of a needle – the procedure takes longer but patients may not even be aware of what’s happening.

Fear of pain – administer a deeper, longer lasting anesthetic; make sure that the patient is fully frozen in the lower jaw where thicker bone mass or extra nerves can give resistance.

Feeling of helplessness – ensure that patients know what is going to happen and that they have control and choice.

Putting a nervous patient under general anesthetic is not a choice Botchway recommends. “It’s much better to have the patient awake and fully involved with their treatment – that will help them resolve their fears over time. We can also use the time to discuss what they need to do after the procedure and what preventive measures they can take to prevent a recurrence.”

The consequences of ignoring regular dental cleanings and treatment because of anxiety or phobia can be severe: rampant decay, rotten teeth, infected gums, poor oral health – conditions that at some point drive the person to a dentist for major work that heightens their fear and creates a vicious cycle. “We have to offer these patients reassurance that once the major work is done, maintenance and future dental visits will be easy.”

Botchway advises people to search for a dentist who makes them feel comfortable and then stay with them. “Your relationship with a dentist should be a partnership, not a dictatorship,” adds Botchway. “Building trust is the best way to overcome your fears.”

For more information, talk to your dentist or go to the Alberta Dental Association and College website www.abda.ab.ca.

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