

Ask Dr. Susan:

Q. I haven't been to a dentist in several years. I am a true dental phobic. Just the thought of sitting in a dental chair makes my palms sweat. Is there any hope for me?

A. Dental anxiety at some level is one of the most common fears. Having someone else's hands in your mouth is truly an invasion of your personal space. Often, we notice that an anxious patient can relate their dental anxieties back to a bad dental experience in their childhood. So, even the smells, sounds or sights of dental "stuff" can trigger anxiety and/or vulnerability reactions. Sound familiar?

Dentists most often use calming drugs such as gas (nitrous oxide) or oral sedation (e.g. valium). Some use conscious I.V. sedation. Nitrous oxide is a wonderful choice because it can be titrated up or down quickly and return to sobriety within about five minutes. The dental profession has only dabbled in practicing alternative, less invasive modalities of anxiety and pain control such as guided-relaxation, hypnosis and therapeutic touch.

Two years ago, our team embraced some new ideas to help our anxious patients. We hired a full-time massage/comfort therapist whose sole responsibility is to provide complimentary services to create distraction and relaxation. Aromatherapy and therapeutic massage during dental procedures often divert the brain's focus away from the mouth. Imagine having your hands or feet massaged and wrapped in warm mitts *while* you receive painless dental care. Top that off with a complimentary table or chair massage and the patient leaves with a wonderful sense of accomplishment and ease –It's a win-win for sure!