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## Fear of the Dentist?

Techniques, and a strong relationship, can help change that. By *Dr. Susan Maples*

Q: I really want to address my dental problems but I am held back by abject fear. Any advice?

A: You are SO not alone! In fact about 75% of us experience some degree of dental fear; 5 to 10% are considered dental phobic--they avoid dental procedures at all cost. Unfortunately, that often results in a need for emergency and/or more invasive treatment, further reinforcing the fear.

Much like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), dental fear usually develops as a result of a previous traumatic dental experience, often during childhood. Such emotional trauma can occur in any patient who suffers a painful or frightening experience, especially if he/she feels a sense of helplessness or lack of control. In fact, *any* negative medical experience can stimulate this "white coat syndrome", as well as *any* history of physical, sexual or emotional abuse.

On the other hand, if we can put the patient in control, it lessens fear. For example, if the dentist is willing to stop whenever the patient gives a stop signal. Because perceived pain is different for every person, I believe the patient should ALWAYS have control over when to cease or proceed.

For this and other reasons, the relationship with your dentist is critically important. People who have successfully overcome dental anxiety mention such interpersonal factors as giving adequate explanation/information, slowing down the procedure, being put in control of the pace, and the dentist empathetically listening to their concerns.

Eliminating emotional triggers from the physical environment also plays a role. For example; getting rid of the smells traditionally associated with dentistry, the dental team wearing non-traditional clinic attire, or playing music in the background. Multi-sensory stimuli including light, color, therapeutic touch, or aroma therapy can help distract the brain from triggering such fear.

Targeted psychological treatment such as Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) or Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), a well-known therapy for PTSD, can be miraculously helpful and is available in our community.

Finally, pharmacological techniques to manage dental fear range from mild sedation to general

anesthesia, and are often used by dentists in conjunction with behavioral techniques. Nitrous oxide (aka "laughing gas") causes relaxation and dissociation and is offloaded quickly with no lasting effects. Oral anti-anxiety medications such as Valium or Xanax can also be helpful and in some circumstances IV conscious sedation is the answer. This "twilight sleep" allows the patient to respond to the dentist's prompts but the patient has little or no recollection of the experience.

Soothing your dental fear is critical in managing your oral health. Talk to your dentist about it and discover together a plan that seems like a comforting idea for YOUR dental fear!