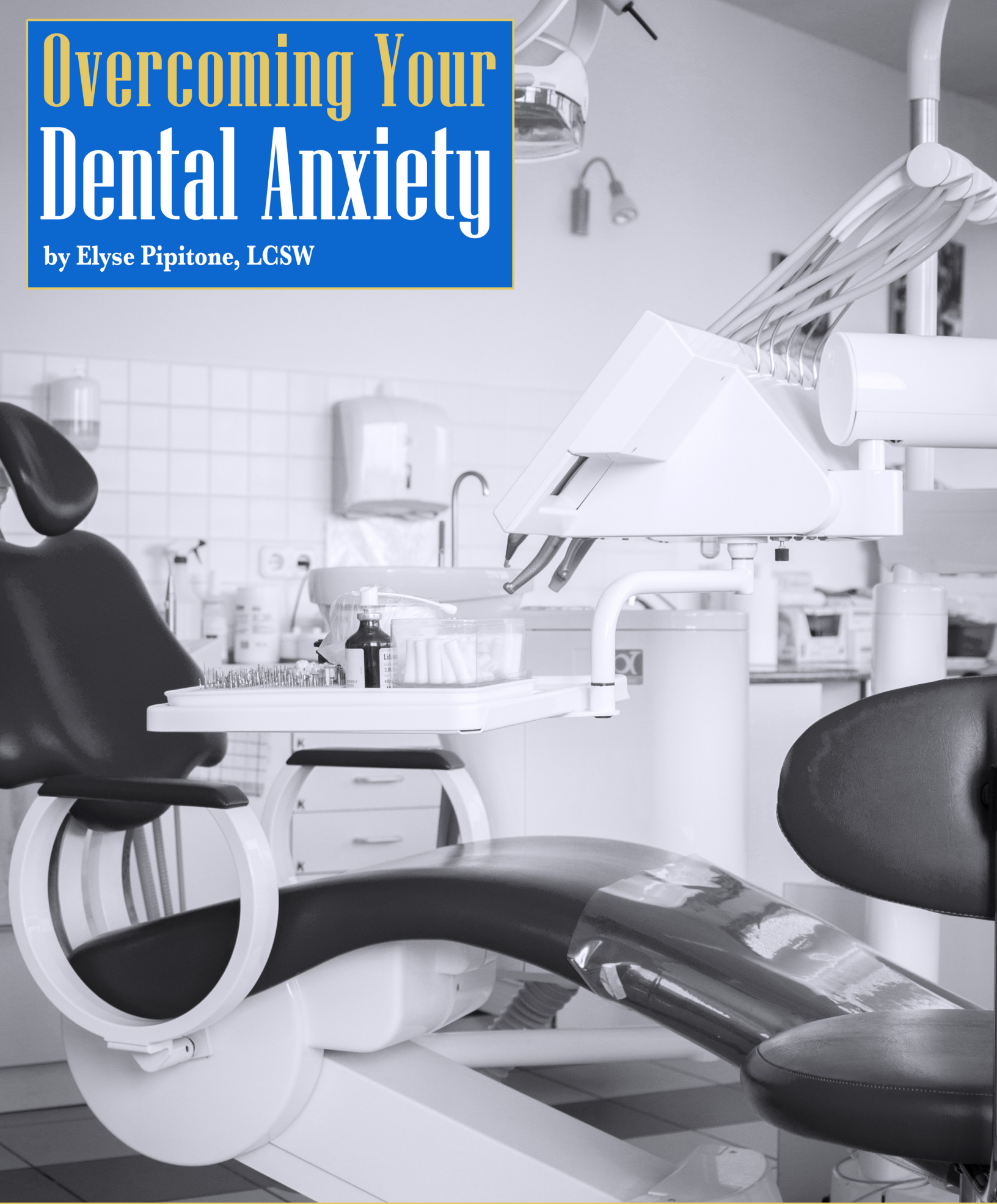


# Overcoming Your Dental Anxiety

by Elyse Pipitone, LCSW



Successfully Managing Your Fear of the Dentist

# **Overcoming Your Dental Anxiety**

**By Elyse Pipitone, LCSW**

**Between Sessions Resources, Inc.  
Norwalk, CT**

Overcoming Your Dental Anxiety by Elyse Pipitone, LCSW

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*Disclaimer: If you are experiencing serious symptoms or problems in your life, seek the help of an experienced mental health professional.*

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About the Author

Elyse Pipitone, LCSW, is a writer, editor, and licensed certified social worker. She has worked with populations including low-income families at risk of homelessness and individuals facing opiate addiction. She has served as a volunteer career coach to members of the National Association of Social Workers Massachusetts chapter since 2011. Ms. Pipitone holds a bachelor's degree from Northeastern University and an MSW from the Simmons University School of Social Work.

About the Series

*Overcoming Your Dental Anxiety* is part of a series of workbooks designed to give people easy access to practical, evidence-based therapeutic tools.

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## INTRODUCTION

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Dental anxiety affects individuals from all ages and walks of life. According to the Harvard Medical School, it is estimated that 13–24 percent of people have anxiety about going to the dentist. While these people may have some apprehension about their dental visits, most are able to attend their appointments and maintain their dental health. However, some people are so terrified at the thought of going to the dentist they avoid it until extreme pain or infection makes seeing the dentist a necessity. Avoiding the dentist until you are experiencing a dental emergency puts you at risk for serious medical complications.

By picking up this workbook, you have already taken the first steps to manage your anxiety and get the dental care you need and deserve. The exercises it provides are designed as practical tools to help reduce your level of dental fear, eliminate self-judgment, and create a healthy sense of control in the dentist's office. Additionally, there are exercises on practical issues like researching dental practices and choosing a dentist who best fits your needs.

This workbook can benefit anyone seeking to build healthy coping skills to address their dental anxiety. Some people may need extra support from a mental health professional to manage their dental anxiety, especially people who have other problems with anxiety and fear.

### **SYMPTOMS OF DENTAL ANXIETY**

Most people with dental anxiety acknowledge their level of panic, fear, or anxiety is excessive—or even irrational—but feel powerless to change it. Symptoms may include

- avoidance of dental care for years, or even decades, resulting in tooth loss, infection, gum disease, or other serious issues;
- depression, crying, or feeling physically ill at the thought of visiting the dentist;
- anxiety that escalates while in the waiting room;
- trouble sleeping the night before a dental visit;
- intense uneasiness at the thought of dental tools or hands being placed in your mouth;
- difficulty breathing during a dental visit;
- inability to walk inside the dentist's office after arriving for an appointment.

You may have heard of the fight-or-flight response, which is your body's way of reacting to an immediate danger or threat. Reactions may include increased breathing and heartbeat, sweating, and heightened awareness. Because your nervous system cannot tell the difference between a real threat (such as a dog with rabies), or a perceived one (like the dentist), it reacts to them the same way. While avoiding a rabid dog is a smart move, avoiding the dentist will cause more harm than good.

### **CAUSES OF DENTAL ANXIETY**

There are numerous reasons why a person may develop anxiety about going to the dentist. Here are a few of the more common ones, which will be addressed throughout this workbook.

**A traumatic dental experience in the past.** A highly stressful or painful dental visit can be enough to stop a patient from returning. Sometimes the patient cannot remember the details of the experience, just the feelings of fear or distress that resulted. Even hearing about someone else's "dental nightmare" can sometimes scare a patient into avoiding treatment.

**Fear of loss of control.** Some patients experience a sense of vulnerability or loss of control at the dentist's office. They may be uncomfortable having dental staff entering their personal space, feel exposed when lying back in the dental chair, or worry about being judged on condition of their teeth.

**Fear of the unknown.** Assumptions about dentists and dental care can be far more terrifying than the reality. A patient's overactive imagination and a hesitation to ask questions of dental staff can contribute to dental anxiety.

**Trust issues.** Patients who have trouble trusting others can find dental visits challenging. They may worry their dental concerns will not be acknowledged or understood, or they are not receiving all the information they need.

**Physical sensations.** Certain sensations may trigger a patient's anxiety, such as the sounds of a dental drill, the smell of antiseptic in the office, or a strong gag reflex. Other patients may be uncomfortable seeing dental staff wearing masks, gloves, and other protective clothing that makes them seem unwelcoming.

**Fear of contracting COVID-19.** As of this writing, the world is in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. This situation has made people very anxious about close contact with any medical professionals, including the dentist. While dental professionals are taking extreme cautions to protect their patients (and themselves) from transmitting this virus, the anxiety this causes is real and understandable. We have included an exercise in the Appendix to address anxiety about going to the dentist during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD DENTAL CARE**

Taking care of your teeth and gums has greater impact on your health than you might think. In addition to preventing tooth loss and gum disease, regular dental care can help keep your whole body healthier. In addition to affecting your ability to eat, drink, and even speak comfortably, oral bacteria and inflammation may also contribute to serious health conditions such as diabetes and heart disease.

Dental issues can also negatively impact your relationships and emotional health. Damaged or missing teeth can cause embarrassment and decrease your self-esteem and self-confidence. Efforts to hide your smile or cover your mouth may lead to an avoidance of social and professional interactions. Additionally, some employers hiring for customer-facing jobs may reject candidates with missing or decaying teeth.

## **OTHER DENTISTRY OPTIONS FOR DENTAL PHOBIA**

In spite of dentists' efforts to accommodate fearful patients, and the patients' best intentions, other dentistry options may be necessary for patients to access much-needed dental care.

**Sedation dentistry** uses medication to help patients relax so that they can receive treatment. The medication ranges from mild sedatives to general anesthesia. For example, laughing gas (nitrous oxide) can be administered through a mask over the nose. Dentists can also prescribe antianxiety medication such as Valium or Xanax. These medications can help patients relax, while still allowing them to communicate with the dentist. For deeper sedation, a patient may get general anesthesia, which means they will be asleep during the procedure. Your dentist may offer some kinds of sedation, but not others. It is important to discuss sedation options with your dentist before making an appointment.

Not to be confused with a similarly named dental chain, **gentle dentistry** (also called relaxation dentistry or a dental spa) offers patients a variety of amenities to feel more physically and emotionally comfortable. These can include heated massage chairs, supportive neck and back pillows, weighted blankets, eye protection, and warm face cloths. Some dentists also provide noise-canceling headphones and even virtual reality glasses.

### HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

This workbook offers seventeen exercises that are divided into sections representing various stages of dental anxiety management: Understanding Your Options as a Patient; Building a Relationship with Your Dentist; Using Coping Skills to Manage Your Dental Anxiety; and Taking Control at the Dentist.

Each exercise worksheet has four sections:

- The **Objective** states what you should expect to accomplish upon completing the worksheet.
- **You Should Know** offers background information about the issue(s) being addressed in the worksheet.
- **What to Do** features exercises to complete, including questions to answer, step-by-step directions to follow, and other activities.
- **Reflections on This Exercise** asks you to provide feedback on the worksheet, including rating how much the exercise helped you, and what you learned from it. This section enables you to determine whether the exercise should be a regular part of your dental anxiety management.

While no single worksheet is effective for everyone, we are confident you will discover techniques that provide relief, solutions, and encouragement.





# **SECTION 1: UNDERSTANDING YOUR OPTIONS AS A PATIENT**

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# Researching Dental Practices

## Objective

To narrow down your options and get the level of care you need by researching dental practices.

## You Should Know

There are probably numerous dental practices in your area, but not all of them will offer the services and level of care you need to address your dental anxiety. This worksheet will guide you through the process of researching dentists, getting trustworthy referrals, and identifying a dental practice that is convenient and accessible.

*(This worksheet is for people at the beginning of their search. If you have already started researching dentists or have identified some prospects, you may want to complete the worksheet titled "Selecting a Dentist Who Meets Your Needs.")*

## What to Do

Word of mouth, professional referrals, and online research are often the most effective ways to begin gathering a list of prospective dentists.

- Ask friends, family members, coworkers, and others you trust if they would recommend their dentist. You can also use social media to get leads, posting an inquiry like this to your Facebook or Twitter network: "Can anyone recommend a dentist in the [city/town] area?" It is important to learn why each person likes and recommends their dentist. For example, if your friend says their dentist is "very cheap, but also rude and impatient," this is probably not a good fit for someone with dental anxiety.
- Ask your doctor, pharmacist, or therapist for their suggestions.
- Use the American Dental Association's "find a dentist" website at <https://findadentist.ada.org/>.
- Research the dental practice on the Better Business Bureau website ([www.bbb.org/](http://www.bbb.org/)) to see if any patient complaints were filed.
- If you have dental insurance, contact your insurance provider for a referral.

Which of the above resources do you plan to use to find a dentist, and how will you contact that person or organization?

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If you have had a dentist in the past, what resources did you use to find that dentist?

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Once you compile a list of several dental practices, you may wish to research them online for more details. It is important to note that the absence of a website (or the presence of a basic one) does not mean the dental practice is unprofessional or inexperienced. Likewise, you may find a state-of-the-art website for a dentist who provides inadequate patient care. If there is no website for a dentist you are considering, call or visit the office. (*See the worksheet titled “Selecting a Dentist Who Meets Your Needs” for details on this process.*)

Additionally, while it may be easier—and more affordable—to get treatment at a dental chain (many are located in shopping malls and advertise “new patient specials”), this convenience often comes with risk. There have been numerous lawsuits nationwide reporting unnecessary treatments, high-interest payment plans, and other fraudulent activity.

### **Other Factors to Consider**

When a dental office has a location, hours, and payment options that are convenient for you, this helps ease concerns about logistics, giving you more time to focus on using the strategies in this workbook to manage your anxiety. Ultimately, it will become easier to maintain a consistent dental routine.

**Location.** Do you want a dentist who is located near your home or office, or are you willing to travel some distance to see the “right” dentist? How will you get to the dental office? Will you need free parking or a location accessible by public transportation?

**Hours.** Does the dental practice have office hours that are convenient for your schedule? Some dental offices are open Saturdays, early mornings, or evenings. It might also be helpful to know how far in advance you need to book appointments, and how quickly you would be able to see the dentist if you have an emergency.

Dentists often recommend that fearful patients schedule appointments for first thing in the morning, avoiding additional time spent in the waiting room. You will also get your dental visit out of the way, and you will not spend the day worrying. If mornings are inconvenient, consider a time of the day when you are likely to feel less rushed.

**Payment options.** Most dentists accept several types of dental insurance and offer financing options or discount programs for patients without insurance. If you have trouble affording dental services, your local health department or dental school can suggest low-cost options.

Describe the most convenient options for each of the dental office features below.

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Hours: \_\_\_\_\_

Payment options: \_\_\_\_\_

Other considerations (for example, wheelchair accessibility, sedation options, gentle dentistry):

\_\_\_\_\_

### **Reflections on This Exercise**

Did this exercise help you research dentists who will meet your needs? Explain.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Did this exercise help you narrow down your choices of dental practices? Explain.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

# Selecting a Dentist Who Meets Your Needs

## Objective

To make your visits less stressful by selecting a dentist who can help you effectively manage your dental anxiety.

## You Should Know

While no dentist is an anxiety expert, you can find one who will respect your feelings, provide support and motivation, and put you at ease.

If you have a history of switching dentists or starting and stopping treatments, it is difficult to develop a trusting relationship. Many people credit the patient-dentist relationship as a key component in managing their dental anxiety, and it all starts with selecting the right dentist.

*(This worksheet assumes that you already have a list of dentists and are looking to narrow down your choices. If you are just beginning the process of investigating dentists in your area, see the worksheet titled "Researching Dental Practices.")*

## What to Do

There are a number of factors to consider in selecting the right dentist, from the dental staff's approach to their ability to address your concerns and fears with empathy. Several of these factors will be addressed in this worksheet.

### Identify Your Needs and Expectations

Patients with dental phobia often respond best to a dentist who meets their needs and expectations. This can include specific personality traits, factors like gender and age, or even just a "friendly" or "kind" face. Check off the factors that are important to you.

I would like a dentist/dental staff who:

- ☐ acknowledges my fear and anxiety.
- ☐ addresses my concerns and patiently answers my questions.
- ☐ is nonjudgmental about my dental hygiene or the condition of my teeth.
- ☐ has a sense of humor.
- ☐ talks very little.
- ☐ is calm and gentle.
- ☐ is enthusiastic and outgoing.
- ☐ is the same gender, culture, or ethnicity as me.
- ☐ is older/younger than me.
- ☐ makes me feel comfortable.
- ☐ is sensitive to patients with chronic pain or health conditions.

\_\_\_\_ has a lot of experience.

What other factors would you like your dental staff to have?

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### Ask Questions

In order to narrow down your list of potential dentists, it is best to call the dental practices for specific information. While many dentists have a website or a presence on social media, you can learn more by talking to the staff directly. This contact will also give you insight into the level of customer service and care the dental practice provides; if the staff is knowledgeable, friendly, and willing to answer your questions, chances are you will be treated the same way as a patient.

You can use this suggested script as you make your calls. It is also recommended you take notes to record the answers, and your initial impressions of the staff and services, so you can compare your findings.

“I am looking for a new dentist who has experience treating patients with dental anxiety or phobia, and I would like to learn more about your practice. Would you please answer some questions for me?”

Here are some suggested questions:

- Does the dentist have experience treating patients with dental phobia or anxiety?
- How long has the dentist been practicing?
- How large is the staff (dentists and dental hygienists)?
- Will the dentist and the staff review my treatment options and costs before doing any procedure?
- What type of financing options or discount programs does the dental office offer?

Add your own questions here:

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At the end of this conversation, the dental staff may ask if you are interested in making an appointment. It is fine to say no if you are not ready. You can say you are simply investigating your options at this time and will call back another time if you are interested in scheduling an appointment.



## Visit the Dental Office

Finally, it can be helpful to visit the dental practice as a potential patient investigating your options. Seeing the dental office and meeting the staff in person can help you understand what your patient experience would be like. Consider bringing a close friend or relative with you for support, especially if you have not been in a dental office for some time. (*See the worksheet titled “Rehearsing Your Visit to the Dentist” for more tips.*)

Factors to consider:

- Is the waiting room inviting, comfortable, and neat?
- If you see other patients interacting with staff, do they look happy, satisfied, or comfortable?
- Is the staff friendly?
- Do you see, smell, or hear anything that upsets you?
- Do the treatment rooms offer a sense of privacy? Comfort?
- Does the staff’s body language (posture, eye contact, facial expressions) seem open and welcoming?
- Can you see yourself as a patient here?

Add your own questions here:

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During this visit, take the opportunity to ask additional questions you may have. If you feel comfortable doing so, you can request to meet the dentist or dental hygienist for a quick introduction. If they are not available during this visit, you can schedule a consultation time to get to know them and to explain your needs and expectations. Be sure to tell the appointment scheduler this would be a “get to know you” meeting, not an appointment for a procedure.

If you prefer not to meet with the dentist and dental staff before your first appointment, you can deliver a list of your questions and concerns to the dental staff in the days leading up to the appointment.

## Reflections on This Exercise

Did this exercise help you select a dentist who meets your needs?

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If you have not yet chosen a dentist, what other steps can you take to find the right dentist?

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Is there anyone who can support you in taking some of those steps? Explain.

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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# Measuring Your Dental Anxiety Level

## Objective

To understand your level of anxiety by using a dental anxiety scale.

## You Should Know

While many adults experience some fear of the dentist, there are individuals whose anxiety is so intense that they avoid dental visits at all costs—risking their physical and emotional health. This level of anxiety is called dental phobia.

The following questions can help measure your level of dental anxiety. Your answers can help you and your dental staff determine treatment options that address your concerns before they negatively impact (or cause further harm to) your health. This might include seeking help from a counselor or therapist specializing in phobias.

## What to Do

Answer the following questions to determine your level of dental anxiety. These questions have been selected from several scales used by dental practitioners around the world.

### Part 1: Fears about dental care experiences

How anxious do the following dental experiences make you feel? Rate your level of anxiety on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = not anxious, and 5 = extremely anxious.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Painful or uncomfortable procedures
- \_\_\_\_\_ Feeling embarrassed or ashamed
- \_\_\_\_\_ Not being in control of what is happening
- \_\_\_\_\_ Feeling sick, queasy, or disgusted
- \_\_\_\_\_ Numbness caused by an anesthetic
- \_\_\_\_\_ Not knowing what the dentist is going to do
- \_\_\_\_\_ The cost of dental treatment
- \_\_\_\_\_ Needles or injections
- \_\_\_\_\_ Gagging or choking
- \_\_\_\_\_ Having an unsympathetic or unkind dentist

Which rating number appears most often? \_\_\_\_\_

### Part II: Fears about dental procedures

How anxious do the following dental procedures make you feel? Rate your level of anxiety on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = not anxious, and 5 = extremely anxious.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Making an appointment for dentistry

- \_\_\_\_\_ Approaching the dentist's office
- \_\_\_\_\_ Sitting in the waiting room
- \_\_\_\_\_ Being seated in the dental chair
- \_\_\_\_\_ The smell of the dentist's office
- \_\_\_\_\_ Seeing the dentist walk in
- \_\_\_\_\_ Seeing the anesthetic needle
- \_\_\_\_\_ Feeling the needle injected
- \_\_\_\_\_ Seeing the drill
- \_\_\_\_\_ Hearing the drill
- \_\_\_\_\_ Overall, how fearful are you of having dental work done?

Which rating number appears most often? \_\_\_\_\_

Answer yes or no to the following sections. If it has been several years since you had a dental visit, or if you are avoiding getting treatment for current dental issues, skip to Part V.

### **Part III: Before your dental visit**

- |  |                    |
|--|--------------------|
| I feel anxious shortly before going to the dentist.                | Yes _____ No _____ |
| I get nervous or edgy about upcoming dental visits.                | Yes _____ No _____ |
| I feel afraid or fearful when visiting the dentist. Y              | Yes _____ No _____ |
| I have trouble sleeping the night before I go to the dentist.      | Yes _____ No _____ |
| I often think about all things that might go wrong at the dentist. | Yes _____ No _____ |
| I delay making appointments to go to the dentist.                  | Yes _____ No _____ |
| Add up your answers:   | Yes _____ No _____ |

### **Part IV: During your dental visit**

- |  |                    |
|--|--------------------|
| When I'm having dental work done, my muscles become tense. | Yes _____ No _____ |
| • my breathing rate increases.                             | Yes _____ No _____ |
| • I perspire.  | Yes _____ No _____ |
| • I feel nauseated or sick to my stomach.                  | Yes _____ No _____ |
| • my heart beats faster.                                   | Yes _____ No _____ |
| • have a hard time catching my breath.                     | Yes _____ No _____ |
| Add up your answers:                                       | Yes _____ No _____ |

## Part V: Avoiding the dentist

My avoidance or fear of going to the dentist has impacted my dental health (dental infection or abscess, tooth falling out, etc.) Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

My avoidance or fear of going to the dentist has impacted my relationships or career (being embarrassed to smile; not applying to public-facing jobs, etc.) Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

My fear has caused me to avoid making a necessary appointment. Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

My fear has caused me to cancel or not show up for an appointment. Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

I am greatly distressed about my level of dental fear. Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

I consider my level of dental fear to be excessive or unreasonable. Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

I am concerned I may have a panic attack. Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

I am self-conscious or concerned about being watched or judged. Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

I avoid going to the dentist because I find the experience extremely unpleasant or distressing. Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

I think something bad will happen to me if I visit a dentist. Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Add up your answers: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Review your totals for Parts I through V. If most of your rankings for Parts I and II are at levels 4 and 5, and/or you answered “Yes” for the majority of questions in Parts III through V, you mostly likely have dental phobia.

The best first step is to discuss your answers with a therapist, counselor, or someone you trust so you can get the support you need. By first addressing your phobia with the help of a professional, you can then take steps toward obtaining dental care, including finding a dentist who specializes in dental phobia/anxiety and creating a dental plan to address your specific concerns.

If the majority of your rankings for Parts I and II are at levels 2 and 3, and/or you answered “No” for the majority of questions in Parts III through V, you mostly likely experience some level of dental anxiety. While you may receive dental care in spite of your fear and concerns, there are ways you and your dentist can work together to make the process less stressful.

## Reflections on This Exercise

Did this exercise help you understand your level of dental anxiety? Explain.

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Did this exercise help you consider the next steps to address your dental anxiety? Explain.

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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## **SECTION 2: BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR DENTIST**

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# Rehearsing Your Visit to the Dentist

## Objective

To feel less anxious during your appointment by rehearsing your visit to the dentist.

## You Should Know

For patients with dental anxiety, a common “solution” is to avoid going to the dentist. Unfortunately, avoidance only increases fear and anxiety—as well as the risk of dental complications. The best way to overcome dental anxiety is to face the feared situation in small stages. To do this, you gradually expose yourself to dental situations you fear, rehearsing the steps until your level of anxiety decreases to a manageable level.

Gradual exposure to your feared dental procedure will help decrease your anxiety and increase your confidence. It will make it easier for you to make and keep appointments for annual checkups, cleanings, and important procedures, instead of avoiding dental visits until it is an emergency.

## What to Do

A simple way to expose yourself to the dentist is to visit your dental office a few times before you actually need care. This way, you can get acquainted with the staff and the exam rooms without having any pain or discomfort to distract you. As you build trust and rapport with your dentist, you can gradually “work your way up” through different types of procedures—starting with an exam and dental cleaning, and transitioning to fillings or other procedures.

Joanne’s experience is an example. She has not had any dental care since her last dentist accidentally cracked her tooth during a routine filling more than five years ago. She no longer trusts dentists but is now experiencing severe pain in two teeth. She has already identified a new dental practice that is sensitive to patients with dental anxiety, and she has made an appointment. (*See Section 1 for tips on finding a dentist.*)

Joanne will follow these steps to prepare herself for the appointment:

1. Visit the dentist’s office at least a week before my appointment. Introduce myself to the receptionist and remind them I will need additional time during my appointment in case I need to take a break or ask questions.
2. Share this list of steps with the dental staff so they know how to support me.
3. Ask for a tour of the office, including the examination room.
4. Ask to be introduced to the dentist and dental hygienist. If they are not available because they are with other patients, I will ask to return the next day at a specific time.
5. On the day of my appointment, I will ask the dentist/hygienist to first look at my teeth while we are both standing up, without me being touched, and without the bright dental lamp or dental instruments. I will begin by showing only my front teeth.

6. I will repeat this process again, this time opening my mouth. There is still no touching or lamp lighting.
7. I will try this again, this time allowing the dentist to touch my mouth using their hands and/or the dental mirror tool.
8. Finally, I will sit in the dental chair and allow the dentist to touch my mouth.
9. I will request that the dental staff explain what they will be doing before they take each step or use an instrument.

Now it is time to rehearse preparing yourself for your dental appointment.

Describe the procedure you are scheduled to receive (dental cleaning, x-ray, filling a cavity, etc.). If you are also fearful of the dental tools that will be used, include that information.

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What are you most worried will happen to you when this procedure takes place?

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As you think about the situation, rate your fear or anxiety level from 0 to 10, where 0 = no fear, and 10 = the worst fear imaginable: \_\_\_\_\_

What people and resources can help you manage your distress before or during your dental visit (friends, therapist, deep breathing techniques, relaxation videos, etc.)?

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Next, make a list of steps you can take to slowly expose yourself to the dental procedure and/or tools causing your anxiety. Before putting these steps into action, it is recommended you review this list with dental staff to receive additional suggestions, and to make sure they understand what may be expected of them.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

Now follow those steps at the dentist's office.

Rate your fear or anxiety level again, from 0 to 10, where 0 = no fear, and 10 = the worst fear imaginable: \_\_\_\_\_

Is this number higher than, lower than, or the same as your previous ranking? \_\_\_\_\_

As you went through the steps, did you notice any changes in your fear or anxiety level?

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Was any step particularly helpful to you? Explain.

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

Did this exercise reduce your level of fear and anxiety about visiting the dentist? Explain.

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Has your impression of dental staff and procedures changed as a result of this exercise? Explain.

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What other dental procedures could this exercise be helpful for?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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# Creating a Motivational Contract with Your Dentist

## Objective

To take an active role in your dental care by creating a contract with your dentist.

## You Should Know

While you might have the best intentions for scheduling and keeping your dental appointments, dental anxiety can make it difficult to follow through. By creating a contract with your dentist, you can become more motivated to take an active role in your dental care, and your dental staff can help hold you accountable.

## What to Do

Use the templates that follow as a guide to developing an agreement with your dentist or dental staff around your dental care goals. (*You may also wish to incorporate some of your discussion points from the worksheets on increasing your control or knowledge found in Section 4.*)

### MOTIVATIONAL CONTRACT FOR MY DENTAL CARE

#### Patient's Agreement

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (name), agree to do the following in order to ensure my dental health:

- Attend my scheduled appointment. If I need to cancel, I will contact the dental office to reschedule at least forty-eight hours in advance, unless I have an emergency. I understand if I reschedule the same appointment more than twice, my dental office may choose not to continue working with me.
- Be on time for my appointment.
- Complete any preparation or steps required by the dental staff before the appointment.
- Come to my appointment ready to discuss any concerns or questions with the dental staff.
- Ask the dental staff to spend time with me reviewing my treatment plan, which may include alternative options.
- Attend all agreed-upon follow-up appointments.

I sign this contract as an indication of my personal commitment to my dental health.

Patient Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Witnessed by Dental Staff:

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Dental Staff's Agreement

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (*name*), agree to do the following, in order to ensure patient \_\_\_\_\_'s dental health:

- Provide reminder calls to the patient before each appointment.
- Discuss the steps and goals for each scheduled procedure.
- Answer any questions or concerns patiently and without judgment.
- Review the treatment plan with the patient and discuss other options.
- Remind the patient about follow-up appointments and what will take place.
- Provide encouragement and support as necessary during the appointment.

I sign this contract as an indication of my personal commitment to my patient's dental health.

Dental Staff Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Witnessed by Patient:

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Reflections on This Exercise

How can a motivational contract help you take an active role in your dental care?

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Are there family member or friends who can help you stay accountable to your dental contract? Explain.

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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# Increasing Your Trust of the Dentist

## Objective

To build a strong relationship that can help you manage your anxiety by increasing your level of trust in your dentist.

## You Should Know

It can be difficult to trust the dentist if you have had negative experiences in the past. Maybe you felt dental staff were insensitive to your pain or discomfort. Perhaps you were misinformed about the treatment process or cost, or you felt judged and embarrassed about the condition of your teeth. Unfortunately, such experiences can intensify your fear and distrust of dentists and dentistry.

A trusting patient-dentist relationship can play a key role in managing your dental anxiety. When your needs and concerns are understood and respected, you will feel more supported and more in control of the dental treatment process, making it less stressful to get the dental care you need.

## What to Do

Confidence in the dental staff's awareness of your needs and expectations can help you build a strong, trusting relationship. The more the dental staff understands what you respond to positively, the better equipped they will be to make your visit as comfortable as possible.

There are several methods you can use to increase your trust of dentists, each of which involves communication and cooperation between you and the dental staff.

### Express Your Needs

Inform the dental staff about your anxiety and apprehension. Describe past dental experiences that caused you physical and/or emotional distress. If your concerns are based on stories others have shared with you or that you read about, describe those as well. Equally important is to discuss any past dental visits that went smoothly, and why.

The dental staff's empathy, sensitivity, and understanding can often be the most important factors of trust. They should respond by listening carefully in a calm, nonjudgmental way as you describe your dental problems and concerns. If you do not feel comfortable having this discussion face-to-face, consider writing down your main points before your visit and presenting them to the staff ahead of time.

You can use this checklist to communicate your preferences. Check off the statements that are true for you.

I will be more trusting of dentists if:

\_\_\_ The dental staff acknowledges my fear and anxiety.

\_\_\_ The dental staff acknowledges my discomfort or pain.



- \_\_\_ The dental staff addresses my concerns.
- \_\_\_ The dental staff understands my past experiences.
- \_\_\_ I feel comfortable sharing my feelings with the dental staff.
- \_\_\_ The dental staff communicates with me throughout the procedure so I know what is happening and what to expect.
- \_\_\_ The dental staff uses easy-to-understand words while explaining procedures to me.
- \_\_\_ The dental staff does not judge my dental hygiene or the condition of my teeth.
- \_\_\_ I feel comfortable asking questions of the dental staff.
- \_\_\_ The dental staff patiently answers my questions.

I will be more trusting of a dentist who:

- \_\_\_ is laid-back.
- \_\_\_ is serious.
- \_\_\_ has a sense of humor.
- \_\_\_ is calm and gentle.
- \_\_\_ is male.
- \_\_\_ is female.
- \_\_\_ is of the same culture or ethnicity as me.
- \_\_\_ is LGBTQ affirming.
- \_\_\_ is sensitive to patients with chronic pain or health conditions.

What other traits are important to you in a trustworthy dentist?

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### **Know What to Expect**

Ask the dental staff to explain what you should expect during your visit, and what measures they will take to ensure your safety and comfort. This process, which some dentists call the “tell-show-do” technique, includes an explanation of what will happen before and during the procedure, such as what instruments will be used, the reasons for the procedure, and how much time it will take to complete (the “tell” step). This is followed by a demonstration of the procedure, including describing the sights, sounds, and other sensations you will experience (the “show” step), and then the carrying out of the procedure (the “do” step).

When dental staff encourage you to ask questions about the treatment, this will help increase your level of trust. You can also express that you want clear, honest, and straightforward answers, or that you want them to avoid using false reassurances.

### **Discuss the Treatment Plan**

You and the dental staff should agree on a treatment plan that includes a clear explanation of your dental problem, treatment options, and preventive procedures, as well as the role you will play in deciding the course of treatment. In addition to any oral discussion, it is important to have this plan in writing, so you can share it with another dentist, if you feel a second opinion is necessary.

Additionally, you may decide you need to have a discussion with dental staff about all possible treatment options and the consequences of each of them. It may also be helpful to have a family member, friend, or someone else you trust to listen to weigh the various options with you.

### **Increase Your Sense of Control**

Increasing your sense of control at the dentist can increase your trust. You can ask dental staff to request permission before they take certain actions, such as tilting you back in the dental chair, using particular instruments, or taking certain steps during an examination. You can also ask dental staff to avoid rapid movements and to look at you when discussing the procedure.

It may be helpful for you and the dental staff to agree on a signal you can use during the procedure to express that you need to pause or take a break. Raising your hand, or using some other physical signal, is an effective way to communicate with staff when dental instruments make speaking difficult. You can also ask dental staff to check in with you throughout the procedure to see if you are having any discomfort and to provide encouragement and support.

If your dentist is not willing to use these methods to improve your trust and communication, it is probably time to find a new dentist. (*See Section 1 for tips.*)

Which of these methods do you think will be most helpful in improving your trust of dentists?

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What is the first step that you can take using that method?

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Name at least one person who can support you in taking that step.

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## Reflections on This Exercise

Did this exercise improve your trust of dentists? Explain.

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What role does trust play in relieving your dental anxiety? Explain.

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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## **SECTION 3: USING COPING SKILLS TO MANAGE YOUR DENTAL ANXIETY**

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# Reducing Your Catastrophic Thinking

## Objective

To reduce your catastrophic thinking about the dentist by assessing the risk of your feared situation.

## You Should Know

Catastrophic thinking is defined as continuously worrying about irrational, worst-case outcomes. It can increase your dental anxiety or cause you to avoid dental appointments entirely. You might constantly worry that something terrible will happen during a dental procedure, or frequently use what-if thinking: “What if the dentist says I need to have all my teeth pulled?”

Some dental patients may also experience what is called pain catastrophizing, in which they focus intensely on any sensations of pain or discomfort they feel during a procedure. This intense focus increases their perceived level of pain—even during procedures that are not typically painful—and raises their anxiety level even higher.

Fear is not always a negative emotion. In fact, it can be helpful when there are valid threats or dangers to your life, your health, or your safety and well-being. However, when you have unsupported, irrational fears, it is common to avoid the situations causing your distress. Unfortunately, the more you avoid the dentist, the more power it will have over your life. The best way to conquer your feelings of anxiety and worry is to determine the likelihood of that dental situation actually happening to you.

## What to Do

Here are some examples of dental fears that are based on catastrophic thinking or unsupported threats:

- I’m afraid that my gag reflex will cause me to choke to death in the dental chair.
- The dental staff will say mean things to me and judge me because my teeth are in such bad shape.
- I had a horrible dental experience as a child, so I know it’ll be just as awful now.

You can examine your own fears to determine how meaningful, accurate, and useful they are. In order to overcome your catastrophic thinking, it is important to dispute your invalid thoughts by following these steps:

1. Identify the thought for what it is: an irrational, worst-case scenario.
2. Identify best-case possibilities—the best possible outcomes you wish to see in that situation.
3. Look at those best-case possibilities and decide whether they are the most likely outcomes.
4. Weigh the evidence and facts available to you, so you can develop a realistic plan for coping with the situation.

Using the following chart, identify your feared dental situations and rank your level of fear from 1 to 10, where 1 = minimal distress or discomfort, and 10 = extreme upset or anxiety. Next, list

the evidence that the situation will happen and evidence that it will not happen. Then, describe a best-case possibility. Finally, estimate the odds of that situation actually happening.

Feared Situation	Level of Fear (0-10)	Evidence It Will Happen	Evidence It Won't Happen	Best-Case Possibility	Estimated Odds of Fear Happening (%)

Did you notice any changes in your level of dental fear as a result of this exercise? Explain.

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Next, write down the names and phone numbers of your personal “response team”—the people to call on in the *extremely unlikely event* the feared situation actually does happen. After you compile the list, make a copy and keep it with you.

The people on my response team are:

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## Reflections on This Exercise

Has this exercise decreased your fear of those dental situations? If so, how?

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What other steps can you take to cope with feared dental situations in the future?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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# Distracting Yourself

## Objective

To experience less anxiety by distracting yourself before or during your dental visit.

## You Should Know

Distraction is a coping technique that can provide temporary relief from your dental anxiety. Before or during your dental visit, you can engage in healthy activities that redirect your attention away from your fear and distress. “Healthy activities” excludes the use of alcohol, drugs, and other mood-altering substances. While distraction is not a long-term solution, it can help you focus on pleasant and enjoyable sensations so the dental procedure is no longer the center of your awareness.

## What to Do

There are a variety of distraction strategies that can be used before or during your dental visit, several of which are described below.

### Before the Appointment

Some patients with dental anxiety have trouble sleeping the night before their appointment. Helpful distraction activities include the following:

- Reading a book
- Knitting or crocheting
- Journaling or writing down your concerns
- Listening to a meditation app or podcast on your phone
- Practicing deep breathing. Inhale slowly to the count of five, and then exhale for the same number of counts. Repeat until you feel your breathing or heart rate slowing.
- Taking a hot bath

Add other ideas here: \_\_\_\_\_

### In the Waiting Room

- Many of the distraction activities mentioned above can be used while you are in the waiting room.
- Bring a family member or friend to sit with you while you wait, to provide support and comfort.

Add other ideas here: \_\_\_\_\_

You might also find it helpful to avoid getting to the appointment too early, because sitting in the waiting room may increase your anxiety level. Wearing clothing that is comfortable and unrestrictive may also make you feel more relaxed.

## During the Appointment

- Ask the dental staff if you can listen to soothing music, an audiobook, a meditation podcast, or a funny or relaxing video, with headphones, during the procedure.
- Keep your hands busy by squeezing a stress ball.
- Use visualization to imagine you are in safe and peaceful place, such as a relaxing beach. *(See the worksheet titled “Using Visualization to Increase Your Sense of Well-Being” for visualization exercises.)*
- Try deep breathing exercises to slow down your heart rate and breathing. *(See the worksheet titled “Using Breathing Exercises to Calm Yourself” for techniques.)*
- If you enjoy fragrances, consider wearing a lotion or essential oil containing lavender, pine, vanilla, or lemon.

Add other ideas here: \_\_\_\_\_

Your dentist’s office may also offer a variety of distracting elements to increase your comfort and relaxation, including ambient music piped into the examination rooms, TVs or DVD players mounted for viewing from the dental chair, or aromatherapy diffusers.

Think of a recent situation where you used a healthy distraction to effectively redirect your attention from something that worried or frightened you. What was the situation? What healthy distraction activity did you use? How did you feel afterward?

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Which distraction strategies do you plan on using before or during your next dental visit? Why?

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In what ways can the dental staff support you in using those strategies?

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In what ways can a friend or family member support you in using those strategies?

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

Did your distraction strategy provide temporary relief from your dental anxiety? Explain.

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If the distraction strategy was not effective, what could you try differently next time?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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# Using Breathing Exercises to Calm Yourself

## Objective

To calm your body and mind and help reduce your dental anxiety through the use of breathing exercises.

## You Should Know

During times of anxiety and distress, it is common for people to hold their breath or to breathe shallowly and rapidly. Learning how to breathe slowly and steadily before and during your dental visits has many benefits: it will help quiet your mind, lower your blood pressure and heart rate, and suppress your brain's fight-or-flight response to fear. By relaxing your body and mind, controlled, slow breathing decreases the intensity of your anxiety.

## What to Do

There are a variety of breathing exercises you can use to calm yourself before or during a dental visit. It is recommended that you try one or more of these exercises in the comfort of your own home or another safe space so that you can determine which is most effective in reducing your anxiety. Once you have selected a breathing exercise, practice it several times until you feel confident using it in the dental office.

Before starting any of these exercises, find a quiet, comfortable space where you can sit without being disturbed or distracted.

### Counting Your Breaths

- Inhale slowly and gently according to your own comfort level.
- Count the seconds that your intake of air lasts.
- Exhale for the same number of counts.
- Repeat at least three times.

### The Navy Seal Box Technique

Navy Seals train themselves to stay calm by using a four-step breath cycle.

- Inhale for four seconds.
- Hold your breath for four seconds.
- Exhale for four seconds.
- Hold your breath for four seconds again.
- Repeat the cycle at least four times.

## **The 4-7-8 Technique**

This rhythmic breathing exercise is used in many meditation and yoga practices.

- Place the tip of your tongue on the tissue right behind your top front teeth.
- Empty your lungs of air.
- Breathe in quietly through your nose for four seconds.
- Hold your breath for a count of seven seconds.
- Exhale forcefully through the mouth, pursing your lips and making a “whoosh” sound for eight seconds.
- Repeat the cycle up to four times.

If it is not comfortable for you to hold your breath that long, try this shorter breathing pattern: breathe in through your nose for two seconds; hold your breath for three seconds; and exhale through your mouth for four seconds.

## **Belly Breathing (Diaphragmatic Breathing)**

It is best to start this exercise while lying down until you get used to breathing from your stomach instead of your chest.

- Lie on your back on a flat surface with your knees bent. Place a pillow under your head and your knees for support, if necessary.
- Place one hand on your upper chest and the other on your belly, right below your rib cage.
- Breathe in slowly through your nose, letting the air in toward your lower belly. You should feel the hand on your chest remaining still, while the hand on your belly rises. It may help to imagine a balloon in your belly: each time you breathe in, you gently expand the balloon, and each time you breathe out, you gently deflate it.
- Tighten your abdominal muscles and let them fall inward as you exhale through pursed lips, as if you are blowing out a candle. The hand on your belly should move down to its original position.
- Take your time starting the next inhalation. Let your body inhale when it is ready. Let your next inhalation be a normal-sized, comfortable one, followed by a long, slow, complete exhalation.

Once you are familiar with this exercise, you can practice it sitting in a chair, with your knees bent and your shoulders, head, and neck relaxed.

Which of these breathing exercises did you try? How did you feel physically and emotionally afterward?

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Which breathing exercise(s) do you think will be most effective to use at your next dental visit? Explain.

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Now choose one breathing exercise to use while following the directions below.

First, describe your fears or concerns about your next visit to the dentist.

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Describe the physical sensations and emotions that arise as you think about that visit.

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Next, practice your selected breathing exercise while those feelings are fresh in your mind.

Did you notice any changes to your physical sensations or emotions after the breathing exercise? Describe them here.

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

Did this exercise help decrease your dental anxiety? Explain.

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Did this exercise help increase your feelings of relaxation? Explain.

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Do you plan to use the breathing exercise(s) before your dental visit, during the visit, or both? Explain.

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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# Using Muscle Relaxation to Reduce Body Tension

## Objective

To reduce body tension at your dental visit by using muscle relaxation exercises.

## You Should Know

When you experience anxiety or stress about your dental visit, your body may react in a number of physical ways. One of the most common is muscle tension, which can come in the form of headaches, neck and shoulder pain, tightness in the lower back, and other types of soreness, aches, and stiffness.

Exercises or techniques to reduce muscle tension and anxiety are used in activities like yoga, tai chi, Pilates, and stretching. You can also use them before and during your dental visit to help relax your body and reduce your level of anxiety and physical discomfort.

## What to Do

It is recommended that you first practice these exercises in the comfort of your own home or another safe place, before trying them—or an abbreviated version of them—in the dental office. It is best to find a quiet, comfortable space where you will not be disturbed or distracted. You can practice these exercises lying down or seated.

## Progressive Muscle Relaxation

This exercise involves tensing and then relaxing certain muscle groups. You will start at your feet and work your way up to your head, trying to tighten only the muscles indicated in each step.

- Loosen your clothing, take off your shoes, and get comfortable. Take a few moments to breathe in and out in slow, deep breaths.
- Focus attention on your right foot, taking a moment to notice the way it feels.
- Slowly tense the muscles in your right foot, squeezing as tightly as you can. Hold for a count of ten.
- Relax your foot. Focus on how your foot feels as it becomes limp and loose.
- Remain still for a moment, breathing deeply and slowly.
- Shift your attention to your left foot. Follow the same steps for muscle tension and release.
- Move slowly up through your body, contracting and relaxing the different muscle groups, using the following sequence as a guide:
  - right foot, then left foot
  - right calf and thigh, then left calf and thigh
  - hips and buttocks
  - stomach, chest, and back



- right arm and hand, then left arm and hand
- neck, shoulders, and face
- Lie still, noticing how your body feels.
- Slowly open your eyes and stretch, if necessary.

### **Functional Relaxation Therapy**

The movements in this exercise are meant to be small and gentle so that they are hardly noticeable. However, you should be able to detect slight changes in how your body feels before and after each step.

- Take a few moments to breathe in and out in slow, deep breaths.
- Gently pull your toes up toward your knees, hold briefly, and let go.
- Press your heels into the floor, hold, and let go.
- Pull your knees together, hold briefly, and then let them drift slightly apart.
- Squeeze your buttocks together, hold, and let go.
- Gently pull in your abdominal muscles toward your spine, hold briefly, and let go.
- Gently pull your shoulders up toward your ears, just enough to feel the tension. Hold briefly and then let go.
- Gently press your elbows and upper arms to the sides of your body, hold for a moment, and then let go.
- Gently clench and hold your hands, and then release.
- Shift your head and neck smoothly from side to side so that your head rolls slightly from one shoulder to the other for three to five seconds.
- Grit your teeth together, hold briefly, and then let your jaw fall slack.
- Press your lips together, and then relax them so they are hardly touching. Then purse your lips and relax them.
- Gently squeeze your eyes shut and then relax them.
- Raise your eyebrows, or knit them together, so that you can feel your forehead move. Then relax your face.

### **Reflections on This Exercise**

Did you notice any changes in your body tension during either of these exercises? Describe.

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Did you notice any reduction in your anxiety or fear as a result of these exercises? Describe.

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Do you plan to use the muscle relaxation exercise(s) before or during your dental visit, or both? Explain.

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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# Using Visualization to Increase Your Sense of Well-Being

## Objective

To increase your relaxation and sense of well-being at the dentist by using visualization techniques.

## You Should Know

Visualizations are pleasant daydreams you can create to experience relaxation and a sense of well-being, even during moments of dental anxiety. Using the instructions below, you can perform a visualization technique before or during a dental visit, shifting your focus from the fear and stress of your dental procedure to a calm and peaceful setting.

## What to Do

First, describe a fear or concern about the dentist that often causes you stress or anxiety.

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Next, focus on a real or imaginary place where you feel relaxed, safe, and peaceful. It can be a beach, forest, house of worship, or spa, or a fantasy setting, such as your own private island. Try to immerse yourself in your pleasant memories or imagination as much as possible to experience the sights, sounds, scents, and other sensations of this place.

What real or imagined place did you choose?

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How do you feel, physically and emotionally, when you think about this place?

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Now find a quiet, comfortable space where you can sit without being disturbed or distracted, and focus on breathing slowly and relaxing your muscles. It is recommended you practice this visualization exercise several times at home or another private space before transitioning to the dental office waiting room, and finally to the dental chair.

Follow these steps:

- Take several long, slow breaths and close your eyes.
- Imagine you are in your peaceful, relaxing place.
- Observe what the imagined space looks like. Notice details including colors, amount of brightness, and the objects around you. Are you alone, or are others with you? Are any other living things there, such as animals or plants? Take a few moments to enjoy your surroundings.

- Notice soothing sounds around you: a soft breeze, a bird chirping, ocean waves, a purring cat, or relaxing music. Focus on one sound that is especially pleasing and continuing listening for a few seconds.
- Focus on your sense of smell. If your imagined setting is outside, inhale the scent of fresh air or flowers. If the setting is inside, observe the smell of firewood, food cooking, or incense burning. Observe the pleasurable aromas for several seconds.
- Feel whatever is around you. If you are outside, notice the calm breeze or warm sun on your skin, grains of beach sand in your hand, or the garden vegetables you are growing. If you are inside, feel the chair or rug you are sitting on, the warmth of a roaring fireplace, or the soft fur of a dog you are petting. Take a few seconds to enjoy the sensations.
- Focus your attention on your sense of taste. What comforting food or drink are you enjoying? Is it sweet, spicy, or salty? Hot or cold? Take a moment to enjoy the flavors.
- Now take a few moments to relax in your safe place, using all your senses. Notice how calm and peaceful you feel in this place. Remember you can return here anytime you experience dental anxiety.
- Take a few more deep breaths, and open your eyes when you are ready.

How did you feel, physically and emotionally, after practicing this visualization technique?

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Did you notice any changes in your dental anxiety during or after this exercise? Explain.

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## Reflections on This Exercise

Could this visualization exercise help you calm and soothe yourself next time you go to the dentist? Explain.

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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## **SECTION 4: TAKING CONTROL AT THE DENTIST**

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# Creating a More Welcoming Dental Environment

## Objective

To increase your feelings of comfort and well-being by creating a dental office environment that feels more welcoming.

## You Should Know

Your five senses are critical in evaluating the world around you, including alerting you to threats or dangers. Individuals with dental anxiety may associate the unique sights, sounds, and smells of the dental office with distress and fear.

On the other hand, pleasant sensory experiences can spark happy memories, feelings of well-being, and soothing comfort. For instance, can you think of a mouthwatering childhood smell that immediately transports you back to more carefree days? Have you ever put on a favorite old sweater and instantly felt cozy and secure? This same concept can be used to transform a stressful or uncomfortable dental environment to one that is more pleasing and positive.

## What to Do

There are a number of things you can do to create a more welcoming dental environment, involving objects that you can bring to your appointment or that are offered by your dentist. Check off which of the following would help improve your experience at the dentist.

- ☐ Wearing clothing that is comfortable and unrestrictive
- ☐ Posting photos of pleasant scenes (tropical beach, etc.) on the ceiling over the dental chair
- ☐ Listening to a meditation app, podcast, audiobook, or your favorite playlist on your electronic device
- ☐ Watching funny or soothing videos on your electronic device
- ☐ Listening to calming music being broadcast into the examination room
- ☐ Wearing sunglasses or eye protection to minimize the glare of the dental lamp
- ☐ Tasting pleasantly flavored tooth-cleaning polish
- ☐ Wearing a lotion, fragrance, or essential oil containing a calming scent like lavender, pine, vanilla, orange, or lemon
- ☐ Using a comfortable pillow to support your neck or lower back in the dental chair
- ☐ Holding a stuffed animal, doll, blanket, or other comforting object

Add other ideas here: \_\_\_\_\_

Additionally, there are offices that practice gentle dentistry with accommodations like hot tea, heated massage chairs, warm pillows and blankets, noise-canceling headphones, a TV or DVD player to show movies, or even virtual reality glasses. (*See the Introduction section on “Other Dentistry Options for Dental Phobia” for details.*)



Have you ever used any of the actions you selected above—or similar ones—at a dentist visit or another stressful situation? Describe the situation and how those items comforted you.

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Share your intention to bring your selected items to your appointment, or ask your dentist to provide them. Here are some suggested talking points for your conversation.

- I have dental anxiety, and I need your support and understanding so I can get the treatment I need.
- It is important for me to feel comfortable and relaxed during my dental appointment, so I would like to bring [*personal object*] with me into the examination room.
- It is important for me to feel comfortable and relaxed during my dental appointment, so I would like your office to provide [*item*] during my procedure.
- Other information I would like the dental staff to know:

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### Reflections on This Exercise

Did this exercise change your impressions of the dental office environment? Explain.

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What other steps can you take to create a dental office environment that feels more welcoming and comfortable?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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# Increasing Your Knowledge as a Dental Patient

## Objective

To feel more in control at your appointment by increasing your knowledge of the dentist and dental procedures.

## You Should Know

You may have heard the expression “Knowledge is power.” This is particularly true in the dentist’s office, where insufficient information can cause feelings of helplessness, vulnerability, and a lack of control—all of which contribute to dental phobia and anxiety.

These feelings can emerge from

- not knowing what to expect during a procedure;
- not understanding what a procedure involves;
- reluctance to ask questions, or uncertainty about what to ask;
- not having details about the cost of a procedure;
- misinformation from websites featuring dental procedures gone bad, or other “nightmare” scenarios;
- negative assumptions that all dental visits are horrible, based on a frightening experience you, or someone you know, had;
- not understanding which procedures are necessary and which are elective;
- not knowing your rights as a patient, including when to get a second opinion or how to request alternative treatment options;
- little or no communication with dental staff.

## What to Do

Check off any of the following statements that you agree with.

- ☐ The dental staff doesn’t realize how scared I am.
- ☐ I feel embarrassed or ashamed in the dentist’s office.
- ☐ I feel powerless or helpless in the dentist’s office.
- ☐ I worry that the dental staff will inflict pain by accident.
- ☐ I don’t understand what the dental staff is doing, or why it is being done.
- ☐ I don’t feel comfortable asking questions of the dental staff.
- ☐ I have had scary or painful experiences at the dentist in the past.
- ☐ I have heard dental horror stories from people I know, and I’m afraid the same will happen to me.

What other concerns do you have about a lack of information at the dentist?

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Have you ever shared those concerns with dental staff? If yes, what happened? If no, why not?

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By expressing your need for information and communication to the dental staff, you can reduce your uncertainty and feel more prepared—thereby increasing your sense of control in the dentist’s office.

Explain to the dental staff that it is important you have the facts you need in order to feel less anxious or fearful. Ask them to explain what is going to happen during the procedure, what instruments will be used, and how long each step should take. You can also ask what techniques they can use to make the experience more comfortable for you.

You may choose to have this conversation before the procedure has started, or to have the dental team describe each step right before it happens; for example, notifying you when you are about to feel a specific sensation (heat, pressure, numbing), hear the sound of a dental instrument, or feel a tool entering your mouth. Or you may prefer to ask the dental staff to provide explanations to you both before and during the procedure.

Here are some suggested talking points when discussing this request with your dentist. You can also turn this into a document you can print out and hand to the dental staff. If your dentist’s office cannot accommodate this request, consider finding a new dentist. (*See Section 1 for tips.*)

- I have dental anxiety and need your support and understanding so I can get the treatment I need.
- It is important for me to feel like I am in control, so I would like to know what to expect from this procedure, in as much detail as possible.
- I would like you to use easy-to-understand words as you explain the procedure to me.
- I may have a lot of questions so I would like you to be patient with me.
- I would like you to tell me what I will experience throughout the procedure, including physical sensations, sounds, and smells.
- I would like you to check in with me throughout the procedure to make sure I am not in physical or emotional distress.
- I would like you to tell me what I can expect to experience after the procedure, and what the next steps will be.

- Other requests I have for dental staff:

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Is there anything that might prevent you from having this conversation with the dental staff? Explain.

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Name at least one person who can support you in having this conversation with dental staff or help you practice having the conversation.

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

Did this exercise increase the amount of information and control you had at the dentist? Explain.

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Did this exercise improve your relationship with your dental staff? Explain.

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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# Increasing Your Physical Control at the Dentist

## Objective

To experience less emotional distress at the dentist's office by increasing your physical control.

## You Should Know

At the dentist's office, there are a number of unavoidable sensory experiences that may cause you to feel a lack of physical control. One of the most common of these is the physical closeness between you and your dentist. Some patients may view lying flat in the chair while dental staff stand over them as an invasion of their personal space.

Other factors contributing to a loss of physical control can include

- inability to speak because of dental instruments in your mouth;
- strong gag reflex (risk of vomiting or choking);
- not enough Novocain or other numbing agent to mask the pain;
- dental chair being tipped far back;
- bright dental lamp shining in your face;
- fingers and hands over your mouth and nose;
- physical signs of anxiety, such as heart palpitations, shortness of breath, sweating, and nausea.

Experiencing overwhelming discomfort or distress during dental visits can increase your level of fear and anxiety—and adversely impact your dental health. To further complicate things, research has shown that patients who experience anxiety perceive the distance between them and their physical “threat” to be even closer than it is.

## What to Do

It is important that you do not endure a procedure until it becomes intolerable. Otherwise, you may be too distressed to calm yourself enough or feel physically well enough to continue. You and the dental team can determine a signal you can use when you need to stop the procedure, such as raising your hand. This agreed-upon signal can let dental staff know you are physically uncomfortable, feeling anxious, or needing to take a break to catch your breath.

Upon seeing your signal, they will stop the procedure until you are ready to continue. You and the dental staff should also agree that you can request a break at any time in the procedure, if necessary. Another option is to schedule breaks at specific times or during certain steps in the procedure, so everyone knows when it is time to pause.

Another way to increase your physical control is to understand what to expect to feel, see, and hear during a visit or procedure. Ask the dental staff to explain what is going to happen, what instruments will be used, and how long each step should take. You can also ask what techniques they can use to make the experience more comfortable for you.

You may choose to have this conversation before the procedure has started, or to have the dental staff describe each step right before it happens. This might include notifying you when you are about to feel a specific sensation (heat, pressure, numbing), hear the sound of a dental instrument, or feel a tool entering your mouth. Or, you may prefer to receive explanations both before and during the procedure.

Check off any of the following statements you agree with.

- ☐ When I am in the dentist chair, I feel trapped or claustrophobic.
- ☐ Sometimes I feel like I cannot catch my breath during a dental procedure.
- ☐ I do not like having dental instruments, or the staff's hands, in my mouth.
- ☐ I feel that my personal space is invaded during dental procedures.
- ☐ I always experience a great deal of pain or discomfort at the dentist's office.
- ☐ I feel vulnerable when I am tilted back in the dental chair.
- ☐ I worry dental staff will accidentally inflict pain or damage.
- ☐ I do not understand what the dental staff is doing, or why it is being done.
- ☐ Sometimes I feel like I am having an anxiety attack in the dentist's office.

What other concerns do you have about loss of physical control?

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Have you ever shared those feelings with dental staff? If yes, what happened? If no, why not?

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Here are some suggested points you can use in talking with the dental staff about these concerns. You can turn this into a document you can print out and hand to the dental staff. If your dentist's office is not willing to accommodate these requests, it may be time to find a new dentist. (*See Section 1 for tips.*)

- I have dental anxiety and need your support and understanding so I can get the treatment I need.
- It is important for me to feel like I am in control, and I would like to use a signal when I need to pause and take a break during the procedure.
- I would like to use the signal [*raising my hand, etc.*] when I am feeling physical or emotional discomfort.

- When you see this signal, I would like you to acknowledge it and temporarily stop the procedure.
- I would like the pause to last for [*short period of time, usually one to three minutes*], and you will ask me if I am ready to continue before restarting the procedure.
- While the procedure is paused, I would like to be in the exam room by myself.

**OR**

- While the procedure is paused, I would like a dental staff person to stay with me.
- While the procedure is paused, I will use a relaxation technique such as deep breathing, visualization, or meditation.
- While the procedure is paused, I will take a moment to call a friend or family member to provide support and encouragement.

Here are some additional talking points you can use.

- I would like you to use easy-to-understand words as you explain the procedure to me.
- I may have a lot of questions, so I would like you to be patient with me.
- I am uncomfortable with physical closeness, so I would like you to chat with me to make me feel more relaxed before you enter my physical space.
- I would like you to tell me what I will experience throughout the procedure, including physical sensations, sounds, and smells.
- I would like you to check in with me throughout the procedure to make sure I am not in physical or emotional distress.
- Other information I would like dental staff to know:

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- Other requests I have for dental staff:

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Is there anything that might prevent you from using one or both of these control techniques? Explain.

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Name at least one person who can support you in using one of the techniques or can help you practice having those conversations with dental staff.

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

Did this exercise increase your sense of physical control at the dentist? Explain.

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Did this exercise increase your ability to express your physical needs and concerns to dental staff? Explain.

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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# Increasing Control of Your Emotions at the Dentist

## Objective

To feel safer and stronger at the dentist's office by increasing control of your emotions.

## You Should Know

The dentist's office can be an overwhelming place full of unique sounds, smells, and sensations that can intensify your fear and anxiety. You may feel helpless, vulnerable, or embarrassed over your lack of emotional control—and avoid going to the dentist to eliminate those feelings.

A loss of emotional control can include

- crying or shaking uncontrollably;
- embarrassment and shame over the condition of your teeth and gums;
- physical signs of anxiety, such as heart palpitations, shortness of breath, sweating, and nausea;
- being startled easily;
- difficulty understanding or processing what dental staff is saying;
- inability to sit still.

## What to Do

Expressing your concerns and feelings with the dental staff can help them understand your fears and work to alleviate them. When combined with the signal technique described in the worksheet titled "Increasing Your Physical Control at the Dentist," you can begin to feel safer and stronger.

Check off any of the following statements you agree with.

- ☐ When I am in the dentist chair, I feel trapped or claustrophobic.
- ☐ The dental staff does not realize how scared I am.
- ☐ I get very anxious sitting in the waiting room.
- ☐ I am afraid I will experience high levels of pain.
- ☐ I feel embarrassed or ashamed about the condition of my teeth, and I do not want to be lectured or scolded.
- ☐ I am frightened by the sound of the drill.
- ☐ I am fearful of dental procedures and/or dental staff.
- ☐ I feel vulnerable when I am tilted back in the dental chair.
- ☐ I believe dental staff have positions of power and should not be challenged.
- ☐ I feel my personal space is invaded during a dental procedure.

\_\_\_ I feel powerless or helpless in the dentist's office.

\_\_\_ I am afraid of not being treated with compassion and understanding.

\_\_\_ Sometimes I feel like I cannot catch my breath during a dental procedure.

\_\_\_ I am afraid of being disrespected or not taken seriously at the dentist.

What other concerns do you have about a loss of emotional control at the dentist?

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Have you ever expressed those feelings with dental staff? If yes, what happened? If no, why not?

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Here are some suggested talking points to use in a conversation with the staff, which includes some variations to the signal technique to better address your emotional needs. You can also turn the talking points into a document that you can print out and hand to them. If your dentist's office cannot accommodate your requests, consider finding a new dentist. (*See Section 1 for tips.*)

- I have dental anxiety and need your support and understanding so I can get the treatment I need.
- I feel/am concerned about [*include some of the statements you checked off*] at the dentist, and would like your support.
- I would also like to use a signal [*raising my hand, etc.*] when I need to pause and take a break during the procedure.
- While the procedure is paused, I would like to be in the exam room by myself.

**OR**

- While the procedure is paused, I would like a dental staff person to stay with me [*and hold my hand/talk gently to me/sit quietly*].
- While the procedure is paused, I will use a relaxation technique such as deep breathing or visualization.
- While the procedure is paused, I will take a moment to call a friend or family member to receive support and encouragement.
- Other information I would like dental staff to know:

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Do you have any concerns about expressing your needs to your dentist? Explain.

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Name at least one person who can support you in, or can help you practice, having this conversation with dental staff.

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

Did this exercise increase the sense of emotional control you feel at the dentist? Explain.

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Did this exercise increase your ability to express your needs and concerns to dental staff? Explain.

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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# Managing Your Pain during Dental Appointments

## Objective

To reduce your level of physical and emotional discomfort during dental appointments by managing your pain.

## You Should Know

Pain and fear of pain are among the most common causes for dental anxiety—and one of the main reasons that patients avoid getting dental care until there is an emergency. You might have experienced a painful or difficult dental procedure in the past, or you might be concerned about the pain and side effects that you might experience from needles and injections, anesthesia, or the procedure itself.

## What to Do

Think about your most recent dental procedure where you experienced pain. If you cannot remember your last dental experience or have never been to the dentist, write down your main concerns and fears about experiencing a painful dental procedure.

Describe the dental procedure.

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What made it painful?

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Did you know what to expect ahead of time?

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Were you informed of options to make the procedure less painful?

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Did the dental staff acknowledge your pain? Did they provide relief and/or support?

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What other factors made it painful or uncomfortable?

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Have you visited the dentist since this experience? If not, why?

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There are a number of techniques you can use to make your dental visits less painful.

### **Communication**

Sharing your concerns and fears with dental staff can be very helpful in finding ways to eliminate or reduce your pain.

- Let the dental staff know you are concerned about experiencing pain, or that you have had a painful experience in the past.
- Tell the dental staff it is important for them to acknowledge any pain and discomfort you express.
- Agree on a signal, such as raising your hand, to inform dental staff the pain level is too high or you need to take a break.
- Request that dental staff tell you what sensations you should expect to feel during a visit or procedure. They can also explain what instruments will be used, and how long each step should take.
- Ask the staff if there are techniques they can use to make the experience more comfortable for you.

### **Distraction**

Taking your mind off your discomfort can sometimes make it more tolerable.

- Ask the dental staff if you can listen to music or an audiobook with headphones during the procedure. Some dental offices even have televisions or show DVDs.

- Keep your hands busy by squeezing a stress ball or playing with a small object, like a fidget spinner.
- Imagine your happy place and visualize yourself at a relaxing beach or garden.

### **Mindfulness Techniques**

By focusing on your breath and your body's tension, you shift your attention to physical sensations you can control.

- Try deep breathing exercises to help relax tension in your muscles.
- Count your breaths. Inhale slowly and then exhale for the same number of counts; repeat at least three times. This can also be done while waiting for your appointment, or during breaks when you are sitting in the dental chair.
- Do a body scan. Concentrate on relaxing your muscles, one body part at a time. Start with your head and work your way down to your toes, focusing on releasing tension in each area.

### **Gentle Dentistry**

Some dental offices specialize in a practice called gentle dentistry, which provides a variety of offerings to patients to make them more physically and emotionally comfortable. Amenities can include heated massage chairs, pillows and blankets, tea or bottled water, and warm face cloths.

### **Pain Relief**

Dental practices offer a range of products and procedures to limit the amount of pain patients experience. Among them are:

- Local oral anesthetic, such as Novocain. Be sure to let the dental staff know if you have a low pain tolerance that requires a higher dose, or if you are sensitive to the side effects.
- Numbing gel that can be used before an oral injection so you cannot feel the needle.
- Nitrous oxide (laughing gas). Some dental offices use this to provide patients feelings of well-being and relaxation. It is often used in addition to anesthesia, but cannot be used to replace it.
- Sedation dentistry. An IV injection in your arm, consisting of an antianxiety medication, puts you to sleep.

Of the techniques you just read about, which you think will be most effective for you to use at the dentist? Explain.

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How do you think the techniques can help with your pain management?

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What steps do you need to take to use the techniques (for example, consulting with dental staff, asking a friend for support, doing research on mindfulness strategies, etc.)?

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

Did this exercise increase your ability to manage pain at the dentist's office? Explain.

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Did this exercise change how you view your role in pain management?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5= moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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# Appendix: Coping with Dental Anxiety During the COVID-19 Pandemic

## Objective

To reduce your dental anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic through education and preparation.

## You Should Know

If you have dental anxiety, your fear of going to the dentist might be magnified by the thought of becoming infected with COVID-19 during a dental procedure. Even if you have been quarantined, you might have pressing dental needs, and you might have to visit your dentist for an urgent matter. The best way to deal with your fear and uncertainty is to communicate with dental staff, prepare for your appointment, and educate yourself about protecting yourself if you require an in-person dental appointment.

Now that stay-at-home orders are being lifted, dental practices are reopening. According to the American Dental Association, no cases of COVID-19 have been attributed to any dental practices in the United States. Dental staff know some patients continue to be worried enough to avoid dental offices, even if they are in pain or overdue for important procedures. Delaying checkups or care for dental pain can potentially turn a small problem into a root canal, infection, or tooth extraction—adding treatment time, higher costs, and even more pain. Dental staff can provide comfort and security during these uncertain times.

## What to Do

Here are some tips on how you can work as a team with dental staff to cope with dental anxiety during the pandemic:

### Communicate.

When you call the dental office:

- Honestly discuss any symptoms you have, travel history, exposure to coronavirus, and dental anxiety triggers.
- Let them know if your situation is an emergency, and explain any underlying medical conditions so they know whether you are a high-risk patient.
- Ask about the office's infection control practices, starting with what happens before the visit.
- Inquire whether patients are screened over the phone before coming into the office. All patients should be screened, and if they are not, that is a red flag.
- Understand your dentist can disclose your Patient Identifiable Information (PII) to authorities for contact tracing if contamination occurs within the dental office.

**Discuss telehealth as an option.**

Many dental offices are providing telehealth services—appointments by phone or virtual visits using video chat. Ask to schedule a telehealth appointment with your dentist for a new or ongoing nonurgent matter. If your dentist would like to see you in person following the telehealth session, they will let you know. Your dentist will explain the risks of having a dental treatment during the pandemic.

**Understand the requirements for sanitation and disinfection.**

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has set specific guidelines for dental practices to ensure the safety of patients and staff. Dental offices have protective equipment and follow safety measures to help protect you, the dentist and office staff, and other patients. Dental staff have been instructed to follow these steps by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC):

- Wash hands frequently for twenty seconds or using 60 percent alcohol sprays or gels.
- Wear face masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE).
- Practice social distancing.
- Ensure proper disposal of used tissues, facemasks, and other contaminated items.
- Avoid aerosol-generating procedures (for example, use of dental handpieces, air/water syringes, ultrasonic scalers) if possible.
- Consider using HEPA filters and ultraviolet irradiation of upper-room air to kill any circulating germs during aerosol-generating procedures.
- Allow appropriate space between waiting room chairs, or let patients wait in their cars until they are called in for appointments.
- Clean clinical spaces after each patient, and clean common spaces several times throughout the day.

**Educate yourself.**

Dental offices are following new protocols and procedures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Extra precautions such as those outlined above have been put into place to keep patients and staff safe. You can find detailed information on your dentist's website or by calling the office.

**Plan your dental appointment.**

It is important to know what to expect before your appointment so you can prepare everything you will need. Have forms, insurance documents, and a face mask ready to take to your appointment. Check with the dental staff to see if you can submit your paperwork and insurance information via or email before your appointment. If possible, wait in your car until the staff are ready to see you.

### Use protective items.

When you enter the dental practice, keep your mouth, nose, and eyes covered with protective equipment before and after your dental procedure. Keep the following items handy during your appointment:

- Face mask
- Face shield
- Disposable gloves
- Tissues
- Alcohol-based wipes or hand sanitizer gel (at least 60 percent alcohol)
- Disinfectant spray for your shoes, car, or other items

Dental staff are trying to make patients feel as comfortable as possible during these uncertain times. They will follow a protocol to keep you safe, and you should do what is necessary to reduce your anxiety and keep yourself healthy. To help you, respond to the questions that follow.

Do you have an urgent dental situation that might require an in-person appointment? \_\_\_\_\_

If no, will you request a telehealth appointment? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you reviewed your dentist's website for current protocols? Why or why not? Explain.

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Write down the questions you will ask when you call to make your appointment.

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Outline the steps you will take to ensure you are comfortable during your dental appointment:

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What else will help you feel more comfortable visiting the dentist during the COVID-19 pandemic?

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Is there anything else you can do to lessen your anxiety?

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

Did this exercise reduce your anxiety about visiting the dentist during the COVID-19 pandemic? Explain.

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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# Overcoming Your Dental Anxiety

Dental anxiety affects individuals from all ages and walks of life. According to the Harvard Medical School, it is estimated that 13–24% of people have anxiety about going to the dentist. While these people may have some apprehension about their dental visits, most are able to attend their appointments and maintain their dental health. However, some people are so terrified at the thought of going to the dentist they avoid it until extreme pain or infection makes seeing the dentist a necessity.

By picking up this workbook, you have already taken the first steps to manage your anxiety and get the dental care you need and deserve. The exercises it provides are designed as practical tools to help reduce your level of dental fear, eliminate self-judgment, and create a healthy sense of control in the dentist's office. Additionally, there are exercises on practical issues like researching dental practices and choosing a dentist who best fits your needs.

This workbook offers seventeen exercises that are divided into sections representing various stages of dental anxiety management: Understanding Your Options as a Patient; Building a Relationship with Your Dentist; Using Coping Skills to Manage Your Dental Anxiety; and Taking Control at the Dentist.

Each exercise worksheet has four sections:

- The Objective states what you should expect to accomplish upon completing the worksheet.
- You Should Know offers background information about the issue(s) being addressed in the worksheet.
- What to Do features exercises to complete, including questions to answer, step-by-step directions to follow, and other activities.
- Reflections on This Exercise asks you to provide feedback on the worksheet, including rating how much the exercise helped you, and what you learned from it. This section enables you to determine whether the exercise should be a regular part of your dental anxiety management.

This workbook can benefit anyone seeking to build healthy coping skills to address their dental anxiety. Each worksheet is written in a manner that is practical, user-friendly, and easy to understand.

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## About the Author:

Elyse Pipitone, LCSW, is a writer, editor, and licensed certified social worker. She has worked with populations including low-income families at risk of homelessness and individuals facing opiate addiction. She has served as a volunteer career coach to members of the National Association of Social Workers Massachusetts chapter since 2011. Ms. Pipitone holds a bachelor's degree from Northeastern University and an MSW from the Simmons University School of Social Work.

## About the Series:

Between Sessions Resources produces a variety of tools to enhance the effectiveness of psychotherapy and counseling. This workbook is part of the company's ongoing efforts to standardize the treatment of both common and uncommon mental health problems.