



Dental Anxiety and Phobia

A brief guide

#NoMoreDentalFear



Centre for Dentistry



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Foreword

This booklet has been produced by Anxiety UK and Centre for Dentistry to provide practical advice, information and support on all aspects of dental anxiety.

Anxiety UK would also like to thank Dr Zoe Marshman of the School of Clinical Dentistry, University of Sheffield, for her assistance in producing this booklet.

#NoMoreDentalFear

Dental anxiety and phobia

Dental anxiety can affect anyone – for some people it's specific procedures that scare them, for others, their dental anxiety is so bad it has stopped them going to the dentist for decades. The most common cause of dental anxiety is a bad experience in the past and it tends to be associated with a feeling of losing control.

Mild fear and anxiety before a visit to a dentist or doctor is very common. It becomes a concern, however, when the fear or anxiety stops people getting the treatment they need and leaves them struggling with toothache, discomfort or dissatisfaction with the way their teeth look. This most extreme type of dental anxiety is classed as a dental phobia (also known as 'odontophobia').

According to statistics from the Oral Health Foundation, almost half of UK adults have a fear of the dentist, with 12% of these suffering from an extreme dental anxiety or phobia. However, as many people do not feel comfortable talking about their fears, it is thought that these figures could be a lot higher.

odontophobia

The signs of dental anxiety or phobia can vary between people and between adults and children.

Common signs include:

- Feeling embarrassed or angry with yourself or the dentist
- Having negative thoughts about what might happen and being scared something may go wrong
- Having sweaty hands, feeling tense or shaky and experiencing butterflies in the stomach
- Avoiding going to the dentist completely or avoiding specific procedures – sometimes by making excuses or cancelling appointments at the last minute.

Why am I affected by dental anxiety?

Being 'afraid of the dentist' may mean different things to different people. It will probably help if you work out just what it is that worries you most. Maybe the sounds and smells bring back memories of bad experiences as a child, or they may make you think that having treatment will hurt. The good news is that more and more dentists now understand their patients' fears and are doing a lot more to ensure going to the dentist becomes a part of your routine; like visiting the hairdresser or doing the weekly shop.



If you have not been to see a dentist for some time, you will probably find that things have vastly improved since your last visit. The general environment is likely to be more relaxed, the dental techniques and safety procedures will be much better, and the equipment will be more up to date.

Why is it important to take good care of your teeth and gums?

Dental health is a central part of your overall wellbeing and it's important to remember that poor oral health is not simply about toothache and decay. It has a much wider impact on general health than you may think.



Research over the past decade has revealed growing evidence linking poor oral health to serious health conditions including heart disease, diabetes, problems during pregnancy and dementia.

Despite the clear links between dental health and overall wellbeing, 39% of people don't go to the dentist regularly. More than a quarter of adults only visit their dentist when they have a problem and around 2% of the population have never visited a dentist.

It is also true that nearly half the population are unhappy with their teeth, 31% of adults have tooth decay and 29% of us suffer from regular dental pain (Oral Health Foundation).

Fear is one of the key reasons why people may avoid going to the dentist. In fact, visiting the dentist is ranked the number one reason for people feeling nervous and is even more common than a fear of heights (Oral Health Foundation).

It is also true that our teeth and smiles are rated as the second most attractive feature after personality, so it's important to look after them!

How can I find a supportive dentist?

Many dentists, like Centre for Dentistry, offer extra support for nervous patients. The first fear to deal with is the fear of telling other people that you are afraid of dental treatment. If you can discuss it with your friends or colleagues, you are likely to find someone else who has experienced similar problems. They may be able to recommend a dentist to you. A dentist who is personally recommended by another nervous person is usually a very good choice.

What can I expect at an appointment?

As a new patient, your first appointment will generally not include any treatment and is an opportunity for you to get to know your dentist, discuss your oral health routine and any concerns you may have. Modern dental teams want to help you have, and maintain, a healthy mouth and healthy teeth. If you regularly use a fluoride toothpaste, this in itself will strengthen your teeth and help prevent decay. Therefore, you may be surprised at how little treatment you may need, even if you haven't been for a while.

Teeth are for life and can last a lifetime if they are looked after properly.

If you can get your mouth healthy, with the help of the dental team, you should need less treatment or maintenance work going forwards. It is important to keep up your regular visits to the dental team as they will not just check for tooth decay, but will also help you prevent gum disease. Once your mouth is healthy, your visits to the practice will often just be easy sessions for checking and cleaning.



The importance of the environment

Your five senses are heightened in an environment you consider fearful. In a dental environment, traditionally you can smell the products, hear the sounds of the instruments, see a clinical environment and perhaps have experienced the 'not so gentle' touch of the dentist. There are ways that your dental team can help you become more positive about the whole dental practice environment. By working with them, you can change the way you feel, think and behave in terms of caring for your teeth and visiting regularly.



What you can do to feel more in control



Ways to relax before your appointment:

- **Write** a list of things you feel OK with and things that you are most scared of.
- **Listen** to your own music through headphones - your dentist won't mind if you take it with you.
- **Solve a puzzle** or problem in your head - this is a good way of distracting yourself.
- **Play a game** on your phone while you are waiting in the waiting room.



- **Try breathing exercises** to give you something to focus on.
- **Keep your fingers busy** by using a stress ball, elastic bands or a fidget spinner
- **Ask questions** if you want to know more details of what will happen and how long it will take.
- **Plan signals** you will use with the dentist if you want them to stop or you need a break during treatment.
- **Reward yourself** afterwards so going to the dentist becomes a more positive experience.

If you use some of these tools you will gradually feel less anxious and more confident about having treatment.

Additionally it can help to:

Visit the practice - familiarise yourself with the environment so you get used to the surroundings. Have a coffee if you feel comfortable sitting there.

Chat to one of the dental team - you don't need to discuss specific dental concerns at this stage. Spend a few minutes with the dentist or dental nurse in the consultation area. Discuss your fears.

Sit in the surgery - feel comfortable with the surroundings and equipment. Relax in the dentist's chair for a few minutes.

Children and dental anxiety

10% of children report having severe dental anxiety, with injections and the drill being the things that scare them most. Dental anxiety that extends past adolescence is unlikely to improve so it is important to take steps to help your children before their dental anxiety continues into adulthood. Many children who are scared of the dentist report that their parents are scared of the dentist too, so dental fear may have been ‘passed on’ from a parent. Children may have seen or heard something frightening about the dentist in the media, from peers or from family members. Many children will be helped by having some positive dental experiences. So, if they attend the dentist regularly and are helped to cope with their anxiety, they will become less worried about going to the dentist when they are older.

Signs of dental anxiety in children

Most children find it hard to tell their parents that they are scared of the dentist. Many children may try and avoid going to the dentist, by saying that they don’t have a dental problem or they may make excuses to get their parents to cancel the appointments. Some children have reported that before their appointment they had ‘tummy aches’, ‘meltdowns’ and ‘felt angry’. However, some children may be embarrassed and become quiet and withdrawn prior to the appointment.

Preparing children for visiting the dentist



Every child is different but it is important to prepare them for the fact that they are going to the dentist and tell them what is going to happen to avoid surprises on the day. Some parents worry that talking about fears of the dentist will make their child worse but for most children the opposite is true; discussing things will actually help them. You can then encourage them to tell you what they are worried about. Writing a 'message to the dentist' can be a useful way of reassuring your child that there are things you can do to make the appointment easier. On the day of the visit, it may be useful to bring your child's favourite toy or book or a music player with earphones.

Supporting your child during their appointment

Many parents are anxious about the dentist but it is important to act relaxed in front of your children, even if you are not! Try not to get angry or impatient and avoid saying 'you need to be brave' or 'it will be over soon'. If your child has told you things they are worried about or have written a message to the dentist, you can help by chatting with the dentist about this and encouraging your child to speak up about their worries.

If your child requires further treatment, at the end of the appointment ask your dentist what to expect next time, including how long it is likely to take.

What to do after the appointment

It is important to praise your child for their good behaviour by saying ‘they have done a good job’ or ‘they have been clever’. It can also be useful to plan a small reward with the child once they are finished. Children often choose things like time to watch a DVD, having a friend over for a sleepover or having their favourite meal. It is useful to chat with them afterwards about what went well or less well during the appointment and how it could be changed. Knowing these things will help prepare you and your child for their next appointment.



Real life case studies

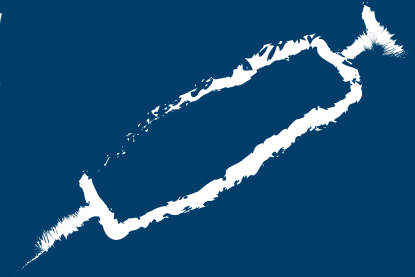


Lisa explains how a supportive dental team who understand dental anxiety can mean so much in overcoming your fears.

“I absolutely hated dentists. I think it stems from childhood; you’re a small child with a big man towering over you - plus you’re going there for a seemingly bad reason. My mum was agoraphobic so I only ever went to the dentist when I needed work doing. I remember having an appointment at 2.30pm (difficult to forget that time)! I felt like my heart was thumping out of my chest. I remember the horrible clinical smell and the anxious wait in the waiting room – it seemed like hours.”



I recently had a bridge fall out and needed to visit a dentist so I called and made an appointment. To be honest, I then cancelled it... I hadn't been to the dentist in probably 5 years and I was so nervous. I did need some help so I called back. Walking through the door for that first appointment, I was so nervous. The team were brilliant though. One dental team member talked to me about my day and even showed me pictures of his dog whilst I was sat in reception, which was a welcome distraction and really helped to put me at ease. On the first appointment I didn't have anything done, they simply fixed my bridge in place and discussed my treatment options. By sitting on a stool next to me, my dentist was on my level so not at all intimidating. She was very calming, polite and helpful. I knew I needed to have some work done and a tooth taken out. I was convinced I wanted to be sedated at the hospital, but over a 4 week period of coming into the practice every week, I slowly got to know my dentist. We talked about our family and what was going on in our lives and it built up my confidence. Each time I was reassured and the next step of treatment was explained to me in detail – often multiple times on each visit. Knowing exactly what was going to happen, I felt more in control and I ended up having my tooth out in the surgery. It's amazing and I'm so proud of myself.”



Gordon

Gordon, like many people experienced physical dental symptoms such “*perspiring in fear*” at the mere thought of going. But after working with a supportive dental team to manage these anxieties, he “*couldn’t believe how quick the procedure was*” and commented that he “*never felt a thing.*”

Nicola

Due to her anxiety, Nicola and her daughter had been thrown out of every local dentist surgery for missing appointments. After a car accident, she needed urgent dental care. Patience in allowing her to reschedule missed appointments, clear explanations and regular calm reassurance helped Nicola and her daughter manage her dental anxieties to get the support she needed.

“Half the battle with anxiety is feeling you aren’t in control of what is happening. By letting her feel like she was, they really helped her overcome the fear.”

Dawn

Dawn had had a past experience that caused a lot of dental anxiety but a supportive dental team changed that for her. “*I was in pain and I came in as an emergency. I was terrified as I had had such a bad experience before at a dentist.*” After her treatment with a supportive dental team she felt differently: “*In all my years, I have never been to such an excellent dentist. It was so refreshing to be spoken to like a human being.*”

Useful organisations

Centre for Dentistry Helpline

We're here to help you explore your options, understand your dental fears better and simply to listen.

Free Helpline: 0333 1234 225

**Helpline Open Hours: 10am-7pm (Mon-Thurs),
10am-6pm (Fri) and 10am-4pm (Sat)**

Email us: faceyourfear@centrefordentistry.com

LLTF.com

Free online resources developed with children and families to reduce dental anxiety called 'Your teeth you are in control' are available on www.llttf.com/dental for parents and children.

These links are provided for your information and reference only. The websites operate independently of Anxiety UK, who cannot be held responsible for their contents.



Anxiety UK offers a wide range of services and support for those living with / affected by all types of anxiety, stress and anxiety based depression including dental anxiety and dental phobia.

For information visit:

www.anxietyuk.org.uk

Call: 08444 775 774

Email: info@anxietyuk.org.uk



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