

# DEALING WITH DENTAL CHAIR FEAR

If you're one of the 30 to 40 million Americans who suffers from dental anxiety, then President Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous quote "The only thing we have to fear is . . . fear itself" might not pop into your head when you're fretting about an upcoming dental visit. People with extreme dental fear avoid the dentist and only seek dental care when they are suffering from extreme pain. But delaying a trip to or avoiding the dentist altogether is dangerous business, as these routine dental checkups can help detect small oral health problems that if left untreated can turn into bigger—and costlier—health issues down the road.

For some, fear of the dentist may stem from an unpleasant dental experience they had when they were younger. For others, it's caused by a fear of pain or needles. So how can you overcome your dental chair fear? The American Dental Association (ADA) offers some tips to help you face down your dental fears.

## SPEAK UP

It can be, well, scary to admit fear, but it's in your best interest to do just that when you arrive for a dental appointment. Your dentist and dental team only want to provide you with the best treatment and experience possible, but at the end of the day, you are your own best advocate.

- Let your dentist and dental staff know about your anxiety when you arrive for your appointment. Tell them that you are anxious, and what specifically makes you anxious (e.g., pain, needles, drills, tooth extractions, etc.). Share any bad experiences you had in the past, and ask for suggestions on coping strategies. Many times, simply discussing your fears can help your dental team ensure that you feel comfortable and may allow them to adapt the treatment to accommodate your anxiety.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions. Knowledge is power, and sometimes, just knowing what is going to happen can help alleviate your fear of the unknown.
- Establish a signal—such as raising your hand—to let your dentist know that you need to take a break during a procedure. Use this signal whenever you are uncomfortable, need to rinse your mouth, or simply want to catch your breath.
- Tell your dentist immediately if you experience pain, even with a local anesthetic. It's easy to feel embarrassed about your pain tolerance or want to avoid interrupting your dentist mid-procedure, but you should talk with your dentist about pain before it starts so he or she knows how to make you more comfortable.

## DISTRACT YOURSELF

If you're feeling anxious during a procedure, redirecting your thoughts can help relax your mind and calm your fears. There are a few simple things you can do to help distract your thoughts.

- Tune out. If the sound of the drill bothers you, bring headphones and listen to your favorite music or audio book. Some dental offices even have televisions and/or play DVDs right in the treatment room, so try to pay more attention to what's happening on the screen and less to what your dentist is doing.
- Play ball. Occupy your hands by squeezing a stress ball or even playing with a small handheld object, such as a fidget spinner.
- Close your eyes and imagine your "happy place" (e.g., a relaxing beach or breath-taking mountain peak) and visualize yourself there. Mentally start planning your next vacation or fun trip.

## BE MINDFUL

Relaxation starts in the mind, and the use of mindfulness techniques—like those used in yoga and meditation—can help soothe your worried head. These deep-breathing exercises can help relax any tension in your muscles.

- Count your breaths. Inhale slowly and then exhale for the same number of counts. Do this five times while you're waiting for your appointment or during breaks while you're 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. For example, you can focus on releasing tension starting in your forehead, then your cheeks, then your neck, and so on down the rest of your body. You may not even get to your toes before your dentist finishes!

Another tip is to schedule your appointment for a time when you won't feel any added stress. This might be a time when you are less rushed—say, first thing in the morning or on a Saturday or evening. By not hurrying to your appointment, you may feel more relaxed and at ease, which in turn will help you be better able to face your dental fear.

Your teeth and gums hold important clues to other health issues in the body. Research shows a link between poor oral health and heart disease, stroke, diabetes, premature births, and osteoporosis. A routine dental exam allows your dentist not only to help you maintain healthy teeth and gums, but also to be on the lookout for developments that may lead to future health problems that may otherwise go undetected (such as oral cancer) if not for a dental exam—and that's truly something to fear! Don't let your fear of the chair keep you from visiting the dentist regularly and being the healthiest you can be.

