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SPECIAL ISSUE: COMBATting PATIENT FEAR AND ANXIETY



Making anxious patients comfortable

by Laura Hatch

Customer service is important in all industries. In dentistry, there is an added issue with our customers, i.e. the issue of fear.

Because of the added concern or fear that many people have, we must offer an even higher level of customer service.

There are real steps you can take to reduce dental fear. First, recognize it is a true phobia and many patients have it. Many times, you get numb to your surroundings; and your daily patient activities in the office lead to not slowing down and helping your patients work through their reservations.

Recognize fear is real, and identify what patients are afraid of specifically. Not all patients are afraid of the dentist for the same reason. The reasons can vary and may be any one of the following:

- **Fear of pain**
Stems from early dental experiences or horror stories told by others
- **Fear of injections**
Terrified of needles or fear injection won't work
- **Feeling of helplessness/loss of control/claustrophobia**
Too much going on in small space and no control over any of it
- **Embarrassment and loss of personal space**
Too close or bad teeth/breath
- **Fear of anesthetic side effects**
Such as dizziness, feeling faint, nauseated, or the "fat lip" feeling

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By speaking directly with the patient and narrowing down the specifics of the fear, you and your team can better address concerns to help a patient deal with the situation. Ask the patient to explain what they don't like about coming to the dentist, what their past experiences have been, or what triggers their anxiety. Once you determine what they don't like, you can talk about how your office will help with that issue or how your office might do it differently than they experienced in the past.

Once you know the basis of the patient's fear, you and your team can step up and act. Show your patient breathing techniques and/or how to count backwards. Many times, other dentists and teams have not shown their patients ways to mitigate the fear. Relaxation techniques will go a long way in helping patients cope, by knowing you are by their side during this nerve-wracking procedure.

As a team, try to be there for patients in the ways they need. Maybe it's by exhibiting humor throughout the procedure to keep them in a good mood or holding a hand so they know someone is watching over them. Take the time to get to know your patient's individual needs to demonstrate a better dental experience.

Always communicate frequently and clearly with the patient. Often, a dental appointment fear stems from fear of the unknown. Keep the patient informed, describe what will happen along the way, and answer any questions, so they will be able to prepare themselves for each step. Tell them what they may feel at a certain point, how long a certain step will take, and how they can let you know if they need a break or feel anything out of the ordinary. Once they get through each step successfully, they will begin to trust that they can get through the entire procedure.

The three things everyone on the team should remember when assisting any patient and especially anxious patients are:

- 1. Respect the patient**
- 2. Put yourself in the patient's place**
- 3. Treat the patient like a family member**

Anytime you question if something should or could be done for a patient to make the experience better, remind yourself of these three most important aspects of a patient's visit. Take the time to treat the patient's fear and anxiety, not just the tooth.



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Quote-Worthy

“ I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear. ”

— Nelson Mandela

COMBATTING FEAR

“Talk to them and LISTEN. Find out why they are anxious, what their fears may be, then address the issues in a positive way letting the patient know that everything is done for their benefit, good health, appearance, etc. I also advise them if they raise their hand, everyone will stop working. I let the patient know they are in charge. This usually does the trick.”

— Cookie