



DR CAMERON ARNOLD :: SMILE DENTAL

CALMING DENTAL PHOBIA

For many of us, the poor old dentist is right up there with spiders and snakes when it comes to the things we fear most. Why are some of us so scared of the dentist's chair? And what are dentists doing to make that twice-a-year trip a little easier?

Dental phobia is defined as the severe and irrational fear of dental treatment. It's estimated that around 75% of us experience some degree of anxiety when visiting the dentist. Although only 5% may be classified as having extreme dental phobia, the problem raises serious health concerns.

Dental phobia can cause the sufferer to frantically avoid dental treatment. It can lead to panic attacks, severe anxiety and serious oral health problems, which create further anxiety and require more invasive treatment. The phobia is more common in children and women and I generally find that sufferers had a bad experience at the dentist's in the past – often when they were children. There's usually nothing else wrong with them, other than an overwhelming aversion to all things related to dental care.

Of course, the chair-side manner of the dentist, and the physical environment of the dental practice, play a big role in aggravating or alleviating fears. Those all-too-familiar sights, sounds and smells of the dental clinic can trigger bad memories. Just as a favourite piece of music can trigger happy memories, the sound of the drill can take us back to the dreaded dentist from childhood.

It's in the interests of both patient and dentist to have a relaxed treatment. So what are we doing to make life easier for anxious patients? The average dental practice today is a world away from those of a generation ago. These days, we try to create a comfortable and relaxing experience that's more like a health spa than a medical clinic. We've replaced the whirr of the drill



with headphones and the music of your choice and have chill-out rooms with Zen music, aromatic oil burners and zero-gravity chairs. We bake bread and light aromatherapy candles to overcome the clinical smells and we provide little comforts like hand massages and cool refresher towels.

Improvements in oral hygiene and preventive dentistry mean we're also much less likely to require dental procedures. Technical advances like the dental laser are putting an end to tools of terror like the needle and drill. Advances in anaesthetics make treatment much less discomforting. In some cases, oral sedatives are given to relax the patient. I've seen this work wonders, helping to calm extremely anxious patients who couldn't sit through a treatment.

If you or your children experience dental phobia or anxiety, have a chat to your dentist. If you don't have a regular dentist, ask a friend or your doctor for a few suggestions. Find a place where you can communicate your concerns and feel well cared for. It's your right as a patient, and our job as dentists. Dental phobia is a problem we take as seriously as tooth decay or gum disease. And yes it can be treated and prevented.

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