

## 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

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.



**Laura Hatch** is the founder and CEO of Front Office Rocks, the leader in web-based front office training for dental practices.

**FMI:** 800-914-3595 ext. 102 or [www.FrontOfficeRocks.com](http://www.FrontOfficeRocks.com).

## 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



# Confessions from the Chair

by Nikki Myers

It starts, believe it or not, with my nose. A little itch tingles, and I know I can't just reach up and scratch it. There are hands at my face and little metal tools in my mouth. Faces behind those plastic shield things lean over me; all I can see is my mouth reflected in their masks. Claustrophobia and accompanying panic cause my heart rate to climb and my respiration to increase.

I confess to being a little nervous at the dentist's office.

I haven't always had this reaction to the dentist chair. I used to happily jump in the chair to get my cleaning twice a year. But, after a panic attack during a root canal had me gasping for air, I have dreaded the dental chair with sweaty palms and hot flashes. It has been two decades since that first incident. Adopting a few relaxation techniques has helped me get through most routine cleanings, but the anxiety is still there.

This response has nothing to do with the staff or the doctor at the office. I've been to three different dentists since that root canal. No one is mean. No one has ever discounted my discomfort. No big monster has ever sprung out from behind the door to sit heavily on my chest to keep me from breathing. There have been, however, some staff who have helped me feel more comfortable. And from them, and my own experience, I can give you some advice about panicky patients.

## We Need Space

There is not much to be done about the fact that you, dental staff, have to be able to see inside the mouth. Leaning over a patient, to some extent, is inevitable.

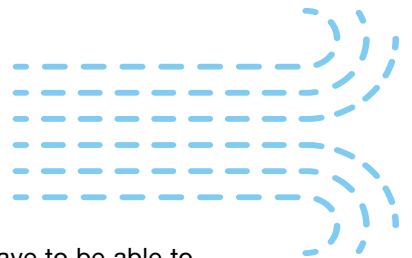
Take small breaks when the procedure permits. Backing off for even 30 seconds gives me room to have a deep breath and for fresh air to circulate over my face. This helps keep the feeling of claustrophobia from building.

## We Like Comfort

Who doesn't like comfort? Dental chairs have certainly progressed in patient comfort and staff convenience.

Sling-type armrests can be adjusted to better support the upper arm, helping alleviate the pressure gravity puts on the shoulders. I can feel the difference. Without that support, my arms fall back along the chair and there is strain on my shoulders even with my forearms on traditional armrests. If not sling armrests, fold up a towel to place behind the upper arm.

If your patient has any type of lower backaches, having a comfortable tilt to the hips is critical for comfort. Ask your patient if they need to adjust before, and occasionally during, a long procedure. A rolled-up blanket under the knees, or a towel behind the lower back, can take off any uncomfortable pressure.



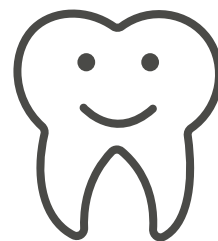
## We May Need to Occupy our Hands

Bloodless knuckles grip the armrests as I concentrate on keeping my mouth open and my head still. One dental assistant pried my hands off the armrests and put them on a soft, pliable object in my lap. It turned out to be a stuffed bunny. I squeezed and petted the bunny, relaxing my hands and keeping the circulation moving in my fingers and arms. Relaxed hands led to more relaxed arms, which in turned lead to more relaxed shoulders, neck, etc.



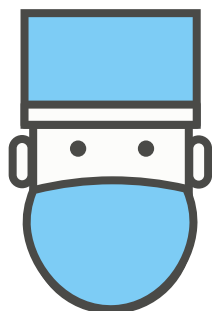
## We Appreciate the Little Things

If you find yourself with an anxious patient, it is too late to stop the anxiety. The anxiety started long before they walked into your office. It is a response the body has when the brain perceives a possible threat and can't find a way to avoid it. It may not be rational to you but the anxiety is real. The sights, the sounds, and even the scents in the office can exacerbate the response. Keep the conveniently laid-out instruments covered and out of sight. Keep air flowing through the office to minimize the leftover scents of antiseptics and that horrid burning smell, (What is that anyway?) so they dissipate quickly. Keep notes in your patient records indicating they have a difficult time with dentistry and what steps you took to make them comfortable. Did having something to knead in their hands help? Then have the item ready next time.



## We Don't Like the Chit Chat

Don't chit chat. Just get it done. Make the visit as swift and easy as possible. When you do need to speak to your patient about treatments or future appointments, slow down. The brain is coping, surviving, which makes processing other things more difficult. I find it easier to set any follow-up appointments, or pay deductibles, before I go to the chair instead of on the way out. Which does your anxious patient prefer?



This doesn't mean you should never say anything. Check in to be sure we're okay. Coach us if our breathing is too fast and shallow. The usual running commentary that may be your habit just prolongs what is happening.

**Be patient with us. Prepare what you can ahead of time to make us more physically comfortable. Adjust your usual office protocols and procedures where you can to accommodate our flow through your office. An anxious patient who feels safe in your practice will stick with you.**

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**Nikki Myers** is Marketing Coordinator at Trojan Professional Services, Inc.

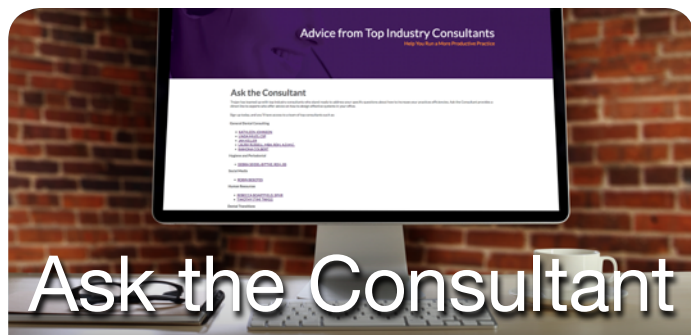
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## Ask the Consultant

**Q:** If the doctor provides alprazolam (Xanax) to the patient at the office prior to the dental procedure, can we bill the insurance company?

**A:** There is no dental code for alprazolam. You can bill the insurance using Code **D999 – Unspecified Adjunctive Procedure** with a narrative. However, I doubt any dental plan will cover it. Investigate billing your patient's medical insurance. If you did emergency treatment of dental pain then you would also bill **D9110 – Palliative (Emergency) Treatment of Dental Pain—Minor Procedure**.

Response provided by **Kathleen Johnson**,  
President of Kathleen Johnson Consulting.

## COMBATTING FEAR

"We have an essential oils diffuser. Lavender oil is very calming. A few drops in the diffuser with distilled water and voila!" — Dr. Berg's office

## What Clients Say

"Have loved this company since I first started in Dental over 20 years ago. Great programs to help make your day easier. Benefit verification is always a struggle. Having basically a virtual assistant check eligibility or our office 7 days out is huge."

— Colleen



## Service Savvy

### Preparing for an Anxious Patient

For some anxious patients, getting in and out of the dental chair/office as quickly as possible is the main goal. Do you have an anxious patient who fits this description?

Preparing as much information prior to that office visit will help with a speedy check-in and check-out.

#### 1. Verify the patient's eligibility with Dentifi Eligibility or Trojan Eligibility Program on your desktop.

- Be sure to do this early enough that any "not found" responses can be taken care of before patient is there waiting.
- Dentifi Eligibility or Dentifi full service program will automatically check the eligibility for you. You need to review the response, leaving enough time to take care of any problems.

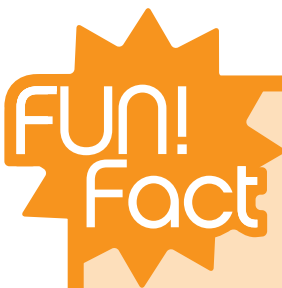
#### 2. Review the patient's benefits with the upcoming appointment in mind.

- Is this appointment for a cleaning or for scheduled treatment?
- If scheduled treatment is being done, can you prepare the estimate of the patient's portion and inform them before arriving so they can have a check prepared?

#### 3. Set follow-up appointments.

- Schedule the next cleaning or anticipated follow-up over the phone before the visit. "Mr. Brown, this is Stacy from your dental office. I have reviewed your dental plan and we are all set to go for your next appointment. You'll need to make a payment of \$xx to cover the deductible for the planned services. Your next cleaning is already scheduled for dd/mm, let me know if you need any changes. I want to make your visit as smooth as possible. Are there any questions you have that I can answer before you arrive?"

**FMI: 800-451-9723, ext. 6089**



## The most valuable tooth

In 1816, a tooth said to belong to Sir Isaac Newton was sold in London for £730.

The undisclosed buyer had it set into a ring. In 2002, the Guinness World Records classified it as the most valuable tooth (which apparently is something that gets measured) putting its value at £25,000.



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