Helping your patients overcome their dental phobia

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Fear of the dentist is not a new phenomenon. In fact, some sources state that almost 20% of the UK population suffer from dental phobia – a fear that is occasionally so strong that it prevents people from visiting the dentist and receiving the care they need.¹

However, concerning new reports have suggested that this fear is on the rise. A recent article in *The Telegraph* revealed that searches for questions such as ‘Why am I scared of the dentist?’ have risen by almost 250% in the last year alone, indicating that more and

more people are starting to feel anxious about visiting dental practices and what this could involve.²

Why is this bad news?

Of course, this is a worrying statistic for dental professionals everywhere for a number of reasons. Firstly, it’s essential for people to seek the expert care of dental professionals in order to keep on top of their oral health, and these rising fears may put a number of people off visiting the dentist altogether, leaving them open to higher risks of tooth decay and similar oral health issues.

Secondly, we also need to think about the impact that this may have on dental practices. Fewer patients means less revenue, and after a year that has already caused considerable financial difficulty for a number of practices across the country, this could have some pretty dire consequences.

What’s causing these fears?

In order to dissect dental fear we have to look at it from a patient perspective. Arguably one of the main causes of dental phobia is the idea that a visit to the dentist will cause pain or will involve a loss of control. This often stems from

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a past visit that has indeed caused a person pain, or can simply be encouraged by ideas associated with the dentist and imagining that certain dental treatments will be painful.

If a patient suffers from anxiety or depression, these conditions can significantly impact their perception of visiting the dentist and exacerbate any worries they may have about receiving treatment and care. People with anxiety or depression are prone to overthinking things such as visiting the dentist, and this can quickly cause a downward spiral of possible scenarios in their minds, which results in them cancelling their appointment due to fear of the unknown.

But why are these fears increasing so much? Although there is no way to tell for certain, it is likely the prevalence of stress and mental anguish that people have suffered over the course of the pandemic is to blame. So many people have been experiencing higher

levels of stress than usual, and this stress may be directly feeding into existing anxieties and worries and even creating new ones.

We also need to consider that the pandemic has made a number of people highly aware of disease transmission and the associated risks of going to public spaces such as dental practices. Although there are measures in place in practices to keep them as safe as possible, people may still be concerned about venturing outside of their homes and putting themselves at risk when travelling on public transport or heading into crowded areas.

anxiety, so this option cuts the chance of fears building over time.

What about playing relaxing music in your treatment room? A number of dental fears are associated with the noises dental instruments can make, so you can overcome this by playing music for anxious patients to enjoy during treatment. In fact, Harvard Medical School has recommended that music or visual stimuli be placed in treatment rooms to help people with fears, so you can always look into these options if possible.³

Hopefully, with these approaches and measures in place you can do your bit to help

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Most fears are completely individual to the person, which can make overcoming these barriers difficult for professionals. However, what we can do is implement a number of measures that will make a visit to the dental hygienist or dental therapist as approachable as possible.

Making your services as approachable as possible

First of all, communication is vital, especially during this pandemic where people may be unsure of what safety measures are necessary for them to receive care. A smart way to keep patients informed is to email them or call them before their appointment, letting them know what they will need (face mask, etc) and what measures are in place for their safety. This will hopefully allow them to prepare for what is in store, meaning they won't have the fear of the unknown that so often leads to people thinking of the worst case scenarios.

Another effective measure you may want to consider is telling patients to only arrive at the practice at the time of their appointment so that they are able to receive treatment right away. For many people, the waiting time leading up to the appointment is what causes

people overcome their concerns and receive the treatment they need. If you have any questions or concerns, you can always turn to an organisation like the British Society of Dental Hygiene and Therapy (BSDHT) who will be more than happy to help you find a solution.

For more information about the BSDHT, visit www.bsddht.org.uk.

References

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