



Dental Tips for Survivors

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Is it extremely difficult for you to call for a dental appointment for yourself?

Do you put off making dental appointments even though you've got dental problems?

Do you space out or become excessively fearful while in the dental chair?

Were you sexually abused as a child or adolescent?

By the age of 18, 1 in 3 girls and 1 in 7 boys will be sexually abused. Not only is the abuse traumatic at the time it occurs, it often has long-term disruptive consequences for the adult survivor. For example, medical procedures can be difficult to tolerate.

For many survivors, going to the dentist is traumatic. They avoid visiting the dentist, have trouble making or keeping appointments, are more likely to have stress-related dental problems, and have severe distress symptoms while at the dentist.

What is the connection between these symptoms of dental anxiety and childhood sexual abuse? There are a number of symbolic parallels: being alone with a person (often male) more powerful than oneself; being placed in a horizontal position; being touched; having objects put into one's mouth; being unable to swallow; and anticipating or experiencing pain.

If you have some of these concerns, please know there are a number of ways to help alleviate your fears. Also, dentists are becoming more sensitive to dental anxiety triggered by early trauma.

What You Can Do for Yourself . . .

The following are strategies survivors of childhood sexual abuse have found helpful in reducing dental anxiety:

Anything that increases your sense of control:

- Talk to your dentist or hygienist about your concerns.
- Ask your dentist to explain all procedures.
- Ask your dentist to forewarn you of pain.
- Develop an agreed-upon signal indicating you want to stop.
- Tell your dentist when you are afraid.

Mental Techniques That You Can Practice Ahead and While at the Dentist:

- Slow, deep breathing
- Imagining a safe place
- Self talk: I can get through this. It will be over shortly. I am safe now. I am taking care of my health.

Other Things to Do:

- Bring a friend.
- Bring a soothing audiotape; i.e., music or relaxation.
- Bring a comforting stuffed animal.
- For women, wear pants instead of a skirt.
- Talk with your health care specialist about the possibility of medication.

added by Sidran as a suggestion from a survivor – If a traumatized patient needs medication, then a trusted person MUST stay with them in the dental office while they are undergoing any procedure while under medication. Some medications are strong and can leave the patient dazed, and possibly hazy and not aware of what could be happening to them

- Give a copy of this information to your dentist.

What Your Dentist Can Do to Help . . .

- Your dentist and hygienist might consider some of the following to help ease your anxieties:
- Offer an initial appointment just to talk
- Place the dental chair in an upright position
- Keep the door open

- Have the dental assistant present
- Not touch the patient's body
- Offer audio tapes of relaxing music
- Check in frequently with you so you can feel more in control of what the dentist is doing
- Offer a body covering (i.e. an x-ray cover)
- Explain procedures throughout the office visit

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