

Attention dental chickens!!

Opinion

Do you cringe every time someone mentions the word dentist? Do you break out in a sweat days before you call your dentist for an appointment? Do you develop a case of insomnia the night or two before your dental appointment? Does going into a dental office feel like you are entering a haunted house and you want to shake and scream? Well, You Are Not Alone!

You are one of the millions of people that feel the same way you do even if they may not share it with you. I know because I used to be one of them. I have spent my entire dental career trying to change that and make a difference for the estimated 10-40% of people who have some degree of dental anxiety or Dentophobia. Actually, I do not like the term “dental chicken”. However, I have had many patients use that term when they meet me and describe themselves in relation to a dental experience.

I have worked with hundreds of patients with various degrees of dental anxiety and assorted fears related to the dental profession. I have researched the causes and the available solutions and have come up with some ideas and suggestions to help you. Here is a basic list of what you can do once you have decided to seek dental care:

1. Ask a trusted friend, your primary care doctor or nurse, your optometrist or local pharmacist for a referral. Then go online and research specifically what you are interested in and check out the dentist suggested.
2. “Interview” the dentist and staff. This can be done by calling the dental office and talking to the receptionist, by scheduling a consult with the dentist or by scheduling a “cleaning” with the dental hygienist and talking with the dentist once you are there.
3. Once you have selected one or two possible dental offices, see how you feel when you actually meet them and ask yourself these questions:
 - a. “Do they seem kind? Are they empathetic, friendly, and caring? Do they seem gentle?”
 - b. “Did they listen to me and act interested when I spoke to them?”
 - c. “Do they treat anxious patients?”
 - d. “What does their staff say about them?”
 - e. “How do they treat their staff?”
 - f. “Do they act calm and like they will treat me with patience or do they act rushed, harried and like they are running a marathon?”
4. Ask the receptionist, hygienist or the dental assistant the following questions- Does the dentist give painless injections?

Volume 5 Issue 5 - 2016

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Received: September 23, 2016 | **Published:** November 28, 2016

Does the dentist use topical anesthetic before giving the shot? Does the dentist understand what it is like to have dental anxiety? And most importantly- How does the dentist handle their patients that have dental fears?

5. Does the dental office have headphones or laughing gas or some aids to help calm fearful patients and what specific techniques does the dentist offer?

Once you know the answers to these questions, you can decide if you are ready to schedule your next appointment. If you truly feel comfortable and like you can trust what you learned, then go ahead. Stop obsessing and fretting and make an appointment. I strongly suggest you make it a “test” appointment. Ask a close friend or family member to accompany you for moral support and for an objective second opinion. See how you are treated and if your choice was the right one for you. If it was a positive experience, then go ahead, pat yourself on the back and make another appointment. However, if it was not a particularly good experience or you felt uncomfortable at any time, decide if you can talk about it honestly with the dentist and work things out. If not choose another one that suits you better. Remember that you are in charge and fortunately there are lots of dentists ready and willing to treat you the way you need to be treated. You never need to be afraid of going to the dentist again. Just find the dentist who offers the method and temperament that gives you the feeling of safety, comfort, trust and of course excellent care.

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Funding details

None.