

DOES A VISIT TO THE DENTIST SEND CHILLS DOWN YOUR SPINE? IF SO, YOU ARE NOT ALONE. HOW TO OVERCOME DENTAL PHOBIA.

Dental phobia is the serious, often paralyzing fear of seeking dental care. An estimated 120 million Americans fear the dentist. As a result, 30 to 40 million Americans do not seek regular dental care. **Dr. Bruce Freund** is a New Jersey dentist who has seen many white knuckled patients in his dental chair. He offers tips for understanding and overcoming dental fear.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT MY DENTAL FEAR?

“The first thing you can do is to realize that your dental fear can be overcome,” says Dr. Freund. He adds, “Fear is a learned behavior which, therefore, can be unlearned.” This will obviously take a team approach between you and your dentist and his/her staff. Communication is the key. You must feel comfortable expressing your fears and concerns and feel that you are being listened to. If you feel that the Dr. and/or staff is not genuinely concerned and listening, then seek out referrals to other offices. You should never compromise the level of communication that you feel is necessary to give you a sense of control over your situation in the dental office. Modern dentistry with a compassionate dental team can be truly painless. The following are some tips on how to overcome your dental fears:

- **Regain A Sense of Control**
Explanation and clarification of any and all procedures proposed is your right as a patient. If you have a question about a particular procedure, ask it! You should have input into treatment decisions and be honest with your dentist regarding how much treatment you think you can tolerate at first. Dr. Freund has found that many patients take comfort in a signaling system, like raising your hand, which allows them to stop for any reason, whether it is because they need more anesthesia, want to rinse out, or simply need a two second break.
- **Never be Embarrassed**
If you have been ridiculed in the past for your behavior or if you are embarrassed by your present dental condition caused by your neglect, express yourself honestly and give your present dentist a chance to understand your concerns. You will be amazed at the wealth of treatment options that you might not have thought were possible.
- **Relaxation Techniques**
If you feel tense in the chair, the easiest way to relax is through forms of physical relaxation. It's important to practice forms of physical relaxation including diaphragmatic breathing and methods taught in yoga. If you induce relaxation in the presence of the stimuli that normally induces your fears (the dental environment), the fear response will be greatly diminished over multiple exposures.

- **Distraction**

Choose a dentist who facilitates an anxiety-free environment. Many offices, including Dr. Freund's office, are now equipped with virtual reality-like glasses that provide both visual and auditory distraction by allowing you to view videotapes. Dr. Freund's office also utilizes walkmans with soothing tunes, massage chairs and paraffin wax dip for your hands.

- **Sound & Smell**

Familiar sounds and smells in the dentist's office may also bring back unpleasant memories and often have the power to elicit an immediate fear response. The sound of a drill, even while in the waiting room, can jump start negative feelings for some patients. It is best to choose a dentist with a closed off waiting area to avoid a potentially uncomfortable situation. The "typical" dentist office smell (created by the use of clove oil), may also set off a fear response. Some dental offices, including Dr. Freund's, light scented candles to keep patients relaxed and unaffected by the scent of clove oil during their visit.

It's important that you do not avoid visiting the dentist because of your dental phobia. The longer you wait, the more likely that more complex dental problems will arise. Fortunately, modern dentistry has many new, wonderful products and procedures that can rebuild your smile and can even make the dental visit a pleasant experience. Combined with a qualified, compassionate dentist you can successfully overcome these fears.