

## Who is This Guide For?

This guide has been written for you if:

- You feel anxious or scared sitting in the dentist's waiting room.
- You feel anxious or scared thinking about the dentist or receiving treatment.
- You feel anxious or scared in the dentist's chair.
- You feel anxious or scared receiving treatment.
- You know anyone who struggles with dental anxiety or fear.
- You want some ideas for handling other anxieties.

## How Should I Use This Guide?

That depends on how long you have and how much detail you want to get into. It is not intended to be read cover to cover but to be flicked through. The guide page may give you an idea of where you would like to start.

Each section is colour coded to try to help you to find the section you would find most helpful. If you are sitting in the waiting room, waiting to go in, look at the **red** section, if you are thinking about a future visit, look at the **green** section, if you are wondering about longer term help, look at the **pink** section.

Everyone is different and as you flick through you will find something that appeals to you more than others. If you are in the waiting room, choose one method and concentrate on that one. Some ideas need preparation ahead and so will be useful for a future visit to the dentist.

If you have an idea that you feel others would find useful, please let us know as we are already gathering ideas for the next edition.

## **I am sitting in the waiting room, waiting to go in!**

### **Breathing**

- Remember to do it!
- If you are breathing fast, slow it down. Breathe in for four counts, breathe out for four counts and repeat as much as is needed.
- If you can, slow your breathing further, breathing in deeply through your nose and out *slowly* through your mouth and out through your mouth.
- Remember to control your breathing, don't let it control you!

### **Talk to the dental team and dentist**

Dentists are used to people feeling anxious. If you let them know your fears, they can often help. Some patients prefer to know what is going on in minute detail; others don't want to know anything. Some people need to pause during treatment, some don't. Unfortunately, dentists are not mind readers so arrange a signal that will let the dentist know that you need to stop.

It is important to be aware that there are some procedures that the dentist uses where they will not be able to stop immediately. Managing your dental fear and anxiety is a collaborative approach with your dentist. They will stop as soon as they can.

It can be helpful to let them know that you have a particular technique to use whilst you are sitting in the chair. That way they can remind you to use it.

### **Relaxation**

Perhaps relaxation is the last thing on your mind just now. This is a great skill to practise and learn. It is much harder to be anxious if your muscles are relaxed rather than tense.

## Progressive Relaxation

Start at the bottom of your body and work your way up. Clench each set of muscles as tight as you can and hold for ten seconds. Then, relax and take the time to feel them relax. Here is a suggested order:

1. Toes
2. Feet
3. Calves
4. Thighs
5. Stomach
6. Arms
7. Hands
8. Jaw (if not sore)!

For added benefit, concentrate on your breathing too. Breathe in deeply and then breathe out as slow as you can.

## **Distraction**

Distraction is a great tool to have in your tool box.

- Try counting the number of ceiling tiles you can see!
- How many corners are there in the room, including chairs, desks, pictures etc.
- Concentrate on your feet! Your feet are the furthest point away from your mouth and so are useful parts of your body to focus on. Can you raise your left foot half an inch? Can you rotate your feet in opposite directions

- simultaneously? What about your toes, can you move just your little toe?
- Look at your index finger tip. Really concentrate on it. Do you notice it tingle? Can you do the same with another finger?

## **Mindfulness**

Mindfulness involves an awareness and acknowledgment of what you are feeling and thinking right now at this moment.

For example, can you feel your feet on the floor? Which part of your foot is touching the floor? Is there a difference in the weight distribution? What part of your bottom, legs and back are in contact with the chair?

When you breathe, where can you feel your breath? Can you feel it as it enters your nose? What about at the back of your nose or as it passes your mouth? How far down your lungs does it travel? Does it feel different when you exhale?

If your thoughts wander to fear and anxiety, acknowledge them for what they are and bring your attention back to your feet or breath.

## **EFT**

EFT (Emotional Freedom techniques) is a bit like acupuncture for emotions except it uses finger tapping sequences instead of needles. There are many different ways of using EFT but a useful one to use whilst sitting in the waiting room would be to tap on the sides of your fingertips. Tap each point six to eight times.

Hold your left hand on your lap and follow this sequence using your index and middle finger of your right hand.

1. Tap the side of your left INDEX fingertip that is closest to your THUMB.

2. Tap the side of your left MIDDLE fingertip that is closest to you INDEX finger.
3. Tap the side of your left FOURTH fingertip that is closest to your LITTLE finger.
4. Tap the side of your left LITTLE fingertip that is closest to your FOURTH finger.
5. Repeat this cycle over and over.

It can be interesting to give your anxiety level a score before you start this technique and after a few rounds, note if it has changed. This technique can bring relief in one minute but can sometimes take several minutes. I encourage you to persevere with it.

### **Self-Talk**

Do not give yourself a hard time about feeling the way you do. Beating yourself up and calling yourself names is not helpful: it makes you feel even more naff! Instead, build yourself up. Praise yourself for your achievements. Anxiety is protective and therefore not easy to overcome. If something protects you from danger (real or perceived) then what motive do you have to give it up?

Try:

- Praising yourself for making the appointment in the first place.
- Praising yourself for sitting in the waiting room.
- Praising yourself for reading this booklet to get ideas of how to combat your anxiety.
- Remind yourself that coming to the dentist is beneficial for your whole health and wellbeing.

## **Imagination**

- Imagine your favourite place. Put yourself there.
- See what is above you, below you, in front of you, to the side of you and behind you.
- Use all your senses. What can you hear, smell, touch, taste and see. Immerse yourself in this experience.

## **What could I do for future visits?**

### **Take a Friend**

Just about everyone is familiar with the idea that people are anxious about visiting the dentist; just think of how many jokes and stories are told where the trip to the dentist is the butt of the joke.

Take a friend for moral support. A lot of dental surgeries have space where your friend can sit to be with you during the appointment. Please do check with your dentist first to make sure that this is possible.

A good friend to take is someone who remains calm and is reassuring rather than someone who would "flap around" you or tell you what you should be feeling.

### **Self-comfort and Soothe**

Some people find a handkerchief sprayed with a favourite perfume or aftershave is comforting in the waiting room, especially if they want to avoid smelling "dental surgery smells."

Take something along with you that you can hold in your hand whilst you are in the waiting room or in the dentist's chair that you find comforting and soothing. Try something like blue-tack that you can fiddle with.

Another thing to try is a weighted bean-bag across your lap.

Find something that you can touch to “bring you back down” if your distress levels become very high. Perhaps you have a ring that you can fiddle with that reminds you that you are okay and not “losing the plot.”

## **Distraction**

Finding something to distract you is a helpful technique to have in your tool box.

Take a music player and headphones. Concentrate on the music. If you are listening to songs, ask yourself if you can make out all of the words. If you are listening to a band or orchestra, can you make out an individual instrument?

Try counting the number of wall tiles there are. Give yourself as maths problem to work out using the tiles. For example: how many tiles would there be if the number was halved or how many edges are there in twenty tiles.

Concentrate on your feet! Your feet are the furthest point away from your mouth and so are useful parts of your body to focus on. Can you raise your left foot half an inch? Can you rotate your feet in opposite directions simultaneously? What about your toes, can you move just your little toe?

Have a person in the room talk to you. Sometimes, hearing a voice directed at you specifically can be a great way of directing your attention away from distress, especially if they can keep talking or give you instructions over which feat your feet should try next!

## **Mindfulness**

Mindfulness involves an awareness and acknowledgment of what you are feeling and thinking right now at this moment.

For example, what part of your bottom, legs and back are in contact with the

chair?

When you breathe, where can you feel your breath? Can you feel it as it enters your nose? What about at the back of your nose or as it passes your mouth? How far down your lungs does it travel? Does it feel different when you exhale?

If your thoughts wonder to fear and anxiety, acknowledge them for what they are and bring your attention back to your feet or breath.

## **Using Your Imagination**

Your imagination is a powerful force. Sometimes, when feeling anxious, it gets too big for its boots and starts to imagine unhelpful things. It is very hard to imagine two different things at the same time, so try giving it something else to imagine, something specific and engaging.

For example, imagine being in your favourite place. Spend some time immersing yourself in that image. Use all your senses, sight, sound, scent, taste and touch. What is in front of you, behind you, under your feet and to the side? Can you feel the wind? Are there distant voices, close voices or no voices at all?

Another example might be to imagine yourself going on a journey through a beautiful place. Once again, engage all your senses. It can be helpful to record the description to listen to. Sometimes, having someone else reading it can hold your attention more easily than listening to your own voice.

If you find it difficult to create your own journey or place to be, then look online as there are many examples there to use or to inspire. Search the term "Guided imagery" in your search engine.

## **EFT**

Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) can be likened to acupuncture for emotions where instead of using needles, certain points are tapped on the body to bring about emotional relief. There are many different strategies that can be used. A simple to use technique involves tapping the sides of your fingertips. Tap each point six to eight times.

Hold your left hand on your lap and use the following sequence using your index and middle finger of your right hand.

1. Tap the side of your left INDEX fingertip that is closest to your THUMB.
2. Tap the side of your left MIDDLE fingertip that is closest to you INDEX finger.
3. Tap the side of your left FOURTH fingertip that is closest to your LITTLE finger.
4. Tap the side of your left LITTLE fingertip that is closest to your FOURTH finger.
5. Repeat this cycle over and over.

It doesn't matter whether you tap on your right hand with your left, or your left hand with the right. Practise this technique at home so that it becomes familiar. Practise using it on situations that only provoke mild anxiety so that you can see that it works.

It can be interesting to give your anxiety level a score before you start this technique and after a few rounds, note if it has changed. This technique can bring relief in one minute but can sometimes take several minutes. I encourage you to persevere with it.

## **Reward Yourself**

Rewards can be very motivating. Think about what you will reward yourself with for having achieved a goal. Rewards need not be big, or cost money.

For example:

- a luxurious bubble bath
- an evening of TV
- a brisk walk in the country
- coffee with a friend.

## **What About Sedation?**

If you are very anxious about having dental treatment, then sedation can be a helpful option.

There are three types of sedation:

- Oral sedation: anti-anxiety tablets or liquid.
- Intravenous sedation: drugs are given into a vein.
- Inhalation sedation: nitrous oxide, also known as laughing gas or relative analgesia.

Each type of sedation has advantages and disadvantages. If it is something you would like to consider then talk to your dentist.

## **Advantages of Sedation**

It makes you feel relaxed and drowsy.

It enables you to have treatment that you would find hard to have otherwise.

Some forms of sedation remove the memory of the appointment.

## **Disadvantages of Sedation**

It is not an option if you are unable to get to the dentist in the first place.

© Louise Keyes 2015

You may think that the only reason you coped with treatment was because you were sedated: especially if sedation gives you memory loss.

If you have difficulty trusting people then you may feel vulnerable, if not at the time, then later.

It is not always readily available.

Some types of sedation require that you are accompanied for several hours until the effects have worn off.

## **Practise**

**“Practise makes perfect!”**

No technique is easy to use until it has been practised so that using them is more like being on auto-pilot than following an instruction manual. Practise the techniques on situations that make you a little anxious rather than the “biggies” first.

## **What Can I Do For Long Term Benefit?**

### **Talking Therapies**

There are many different reasons why people become anxious or scared of the dentist or having dental treatment. Sometimes, the source of the fear is nothing to do with dentistry at all.

Talking to a therapist or counsellor can help to process these reasons and

relieve or even cure the anxiety or fear. They can also help you to come up with strategies to deal with your feelings so that you can access the dentist more easily or not pass on your fear to your children or help you achieve whatever the goal is that you wish to set.

There are many different talking therapies available. What research has shown is that it is not so much the style of therapy but the relationship between the client and counsellor / therapist that makes the most difference to its success.

## **EFT**

Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) has been likened to acupuncture for emotions but instead of needles, certain points on the body are tapped. Earlier sections of this leaflet have described a simple EFT tapping routine that can be used to relieve symptoms of anxiety and fear. That technique is quite useful when in a public place as the full tapping routine might make you feel a little self-conscious!

The full tapping sequence involves tapping several parts of your body whilst drawing your mind's attention to a particular phrase.

The reasons why people are anxious or fearful of the dentist are many and can be complex. An EFT practitioner can help you process these emotions and even teach the technique so that you can go on to use it yourself.

One of the advantages of EFT is that it can be very private: you do not even need to reveal what it is you are thinking, remembering or feeling to your practitioner unless you choose to. This is great if you are feeling embarrassed or ashamed of what you are experiencing.

Hi,

I used to be a dentist and particularly enjoyed working with patients who were scared of the dentist, dentally phobic and those who struggled with mental health difficulties and low self-esteem.

Over the years, I have struggled with my fear of dentists and dental treatment. I have been afraid of the dental chair moving whilst I was in it and having the simplest dental treatments. All this anxiety was despite having a friendly dentist. I think this is what drew me to loving my work with patients who were anxious or afraid: I could identify with what they were thinking or feeling.

I returned to university, studying psychology and training as a counsellor and EFT practitioner, with an aim of helping people overcome their dental fears and address their underlying reasons.

Because I am dentally anxious, worked as a dentist, studied psychology and am a counsellor, I am in strong position to help people with dental fears. I understand that each person's anxiety is unique and how unsettling this fear can be.

Through talking therapies and EFT, these fears can be explored and understood in a safe environment. Strategies can be learned to reduce and even overcome the fear or phobia.

I believe that everyone has the strength within them to overcome their anxiety, fear or phobia but sometimes they need help to discover it.

I invite you to contact me to see how I can help.

Louise



*Counselling & Dental Anxiety Management*

0790 1218 165

NewcastleCounselling@yahoo.co.uk