

Selecting a Dentist Who Meets Your Needs

Objective

To make your visits less stressful by selecting a dentist who can help you effectively manage your dental anxiety.

You Should Know

While no dentist is an anxiety expert, you can find one who will respect your feelings, provide support and motivation, and put you at ease.

If you have a history of switching dentists or starting and stopping treatments, it is difficult to develop a trusting relationship. Many people credit the patient-dentist relationship as a key component in managing their dental anxiety, and it all starts with selecting the right dentist.

(This worksheet assumes that you already have a list of dentists and are looking to narrow down your choices. If you are just beginning the process of investigating dentists in your area, see the worksheet titled "Researching Dental Practices.")

What to Do

There are a number of factors to consider in selecting the right dentist, from the dental staff's approach to their ability to address your concerns and fears with empathy. Several of these factors will be addressed in this worksheet.

Identify Your Needs and Expectations

Patients with dental phobia often respond best to a dentist who meets their needs and expectations. This can include specific personality traits, factors like gender and age, or even just a "friendly" or "kind" face. Check off the factors that are important to you.

I would like a dentist/dental staff who:

- acknowledges my fear and anxiety.
- addresses my concerns and patiently answers my questions.
- is nonjudgmental about my dental hygiene or the condition of my teeth.
- has a sense of humor.
- talks very little.
- is calm and gentle.
- is enthusiastic and outgoing.
- is the same gender, culture, or ethnicity as me.
- is older/younger than me.
- makes me feel comfortable.
- is sensitive to patients with chronic pain or health conditions.

___ has a lot of experience.

What other factors would you like your dental staff to have?

Ask Questions

In order to narrow down your list of potential dentists, it is best to call the dental practices for specific information. While many dentists have a website or a presence on social media, you can learn more by talking to the staff directly. This contact will also give you insight into the level of customer service and care the dental practice provides; if the staff is knowledgeable, friendly, and willing to answer your questions, chances are you will be treated the same way as a patient.

You can use this suggested script as you make your calls. It is also recommended you take notes to record the answers, and your initial impressions of the staff and services, so you can compare your findings.

“I am looking for a new dentist who has experience treating patients with dental anxiety or phobia, and I would like to learn more about your practice. Would you please answer some questions for me?”

Here are some suggested questions:

- Does the dentist have experience treating patients with dental phobia or anxiety?
- How long has the dentist been practicing?
- How large is the staff (dentists and dental hygienists)?
- Will the dentist and the staff review my treatment options and costs before doing any procedure?
- What type of financing options or discount programs does the dental office offer?

Add your own questions here:

At the end of this conversation, the dental staff may ask if you are interested in making an appointment. It is fine to say no if you are not ready. You can say you are simply investigating your options at this time and will call back another time if you are interested in scheduling an appointment.

Visit the Dental Office

Finally, it can be helpful to visit the dental practice as a potential patient investigating your options. Seeing the dental office and meeting the staff in person can help you understand what your patient experience would be like. Consider bringing a close friend or relative with you for support, especially if you have not been in a dental office for some time. (*See the worksheet titled "Rehearsing Your Visit to the Dentist" for more tips.*)

Factors to consider:

- Is the waiting room inviting, comfortable, and neat?
- If you see other patients interacting with staff, do they look happy, satisfied, or comfortable?
- Is the staff friendly?
- Do you see, smell, or hear anything that upsets you?
- Do the treatment rooms offer a sense of privacy? Comfort?
- Does the staff's body language (posture, eye contact, facial expressions) seem open and welcoming?
- Can you see yourself as a patient here?

Add your own questions here:

During this visit, take the opportunity to ask additional questions you may have. If you feel comfortable doing so, you can request to meet the dentist or dental hygienist for a quick introduction. If they are not available during this visit, you can schedule a consultation time to get to know them and to explain your needs and expectations. Be sure to tell the appointment scheduler this would be a "get to know you" meeting, not an appointment for a procedure.

If you prefer not to meet with the dentist and dental staff before your first appointment, you can deliver a list of your questions and concerns to the dental staff in the days leading up to the appointment.

Reflections on This Exercise

Did this exercise help you select a dentist who meets your needs?

If you have not yet chosen a dentist, what other steps can you take to find the right dentist?

Is there anyone who can support you in taking some of those steps? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
