Scientists identify most effective coping strategies

Scientists at Sweden’s Sahlgrenska Academy have identified key coping mechanisms used by people who suffer from dental fear to manage stress during dental visits and treatment. At the top of the list: optimism on the part of the patient and an atmosphere of humor in interactions with the dental staff.

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severe dental fear, still go to the dentist regularly. To increase understanding of dental fear and its causes, scientists at the Sahlgrenska Academy at the University of Gothenburg conducted two unique studies to investigate strategies people with dental fear use to cope with visiting the dentist and receiving dental treatment.

Five core strategies

In one study, Jenny Bernson, LDS, and her colleagues asked people suffering from dental fear to complete a questionnaire, enabling the researchers to isolate five core strategies that dental patients used to overcome dental fear:

- **Self-efficacy**, using one’s own internal resources. Example: “I tell myself to be strong enough to stand it, despite my fear.”
- **Self-distraction**. Examples: “I count to myself, sing to myself or try to play mental games with myself to keep my mind off the treatment.”
- **Distancing**. Example: “I think the pain sensation feels like something else, such as numbness.”
- **Prayer**. Example: “I pray that the treatment will soon be over.”
- **Optimism**. Example: “I try to think of the future, about what everything will be like after the treatment.”

In terms of which of the five are most effective, Bernson said, “The study has shown that patients who adopt an optimistic mind-set cope with dental treatment significantly better, and they visit the dentist more regularly than patients who spend time in prayer, despair or catastrophizing.”

The second study was based on interviews with patients suffering from dental fear. They said humor was one of the most critical coping strategies. “Psychological barriers can be broken down by humor, both as a result of the patient and the dentist coming together more as equals, and as a result of humor reducing stress, increasing well-being and creating a pleasant atmosphere,” Bernson said.

The strategies that these two studies have identified will form the basis of a questionnaire that may be possible to use in the future when treating patients suffering from dental fear.


The article “Making dental care possible — a mutual affair” has been published in the scientific journal European Journal of Oral Science.

Bernson is a doctoral student in behavioral and community dentistry at the Institute of Odontology, Sahlgrenska Academy, University of Gothenburg and at the Research Center, Public Dental Service, Region Västra Götaland, Sweden.

(Source: Sahlgrenska Academy)
smoothly,” said NIDCR program specialist Donald DeNucci, DDS. “But under the current grant, we’re now building on our initial investment, and that should lead to a faster start and sustained productivity over the next seven years.”

DeNucci said the NDPBRN plans to expand the number of participating practitioners to 5,000. Greater participation will allow for an increased number and range of studies, to produce data that can be better generalized to the U.S. population in all its diversity.

The NDPBRN also will welcome greater participation of practitioners in the various dental subspecialties. These include endodontists, periodontists, orthodontists, oral surgeons, prosthodontists, oral pathologists, as well as pediatric and public health dentists. “We also welcome the nation’s community health centers and the federal dental services, such as those in the Departments of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense, and the Indian Health Service of the Department of Health and Human Services,” said DeNucci. “We can certainly help to develop innovative, low-cost techniques to improve the oral health of all Americans.”

Another objective is to extend participation across the country. “With today’s advanced communications tools, no rural community is too remote for participation in the national network,” said Gregg Gilbert, DDS, MBA, the NDPBRN national network director and chair of UAB School of Dentistry’s Department of General Dental Sciences. “Our aim is to be inclusive. We want the NDPBRN to truly become the nation’s network.”

For more information visit www.nidcr.nih.gov/research/der/clinicalresearch/dentalpracticebasedresearchnetworks.htm.

The National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR) is the National Institutes of Health’s leading funder of research on oral, dental, and craniofacial health. To learn more about NIDCR, visit the institute’s website at www.nidcr.nih.gov.

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(Sources: National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research and University of Alabama at Birmingham)