

# *The 8 Ways to* Deal With Dental Fears



**Dr. Yaremko focuses on the  
treatment of dental-phobic patients**

**360.734.6620**



*"Dentistry with Care"*

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# How I Came to Work With the Dentally Anxious

*My initial experiences at the dentist were terrible. I had severe pain and no control over the situation, and the dentist seemed to be at a loss for a solution. He also communicated to me (with a look) that this was MY problem and that I was expected to sit there and behave until the work was done.*

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The dentist and staff had the attitude that there was something wrong with ME. I hadn't really noticed at the time, but gradually all dental visits produced a continual increase in my anxiety.

As a young man, my skill in science, combined with my goal of wanting to help people, led me to dental school where, as dental students, we had to inject each other with anesthetic. I found out instantly that how this was done, who did it, and their attitude about it determined what kind of experience I had. I also realized that I was relatively alone among the other dental students in my anxiety about dental treatment. I understood that my uncomfortable teenage experiences had left me with some very deep emotional reactions about dentistry. I had become a dentist who was dental-phobic.

While this may seem like an odd career path, it has had the positive effect of equipping me with a sense of what the dentally anxious patient would and wouldn't like. In over 25 years of practice, I've collected ideas and developed methods for pain and anxiety control and communicating with patients. In addition to learning about that, I've spent a lot of time learning about reconstructive and rehabilitative dentistry. I don't focus on quick fixes or unproven trends; instead, I practice techniques from dental-reconstruction experts whose goal is to provide patients with long-lasting solutions. I know that most anxious patients want to avoid dental repairs done over again.

In my years of practice, I've found that my skills and perspective help me discuss anxiety and its control with patients and come up with a dental plan to deal with their specific situation. The first part of this booklet

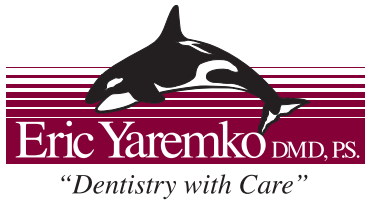


is designed to help you understand the problems you may face with dental fears and to help you determine your level of anxiety. The part of the booklet on anxiety control is similar to the conversation that I've had with anxious patients more than a thousand times. As you read through it, try to rate your anxiety level and think about how you feel about the various methods of pain and anxiety control. Some of these methods are available on a widespread basis, and some are not. My office may be a little unusual in offering all of them, but as I said earlier, this is a 25+ year collection.

I believe this information will help you have a comfortable dental experience.

Sincerely,

—Eric Yaremko DMD, PS



# 8 Common Questions About Dealing With Dental Fears

## **1. Are your dental anxieties keeping you from getting the care you need?**

If the thought of going to the dentist makes you nervous, you are not alone. Many people have fears about going to the dentist. Some have had bad experiences in the past. Other people have delayed going to the dentist and know that they now face significant dental work. Regular dental care is an important way to stay healthy. Dentistry has advanced a lot in the past few decades, and many things can be done to ease your dental fears.

We understand dental fears, and we can help you determine what you need so that you can cope with getting dental treatment.

## **2. How fearful are you?**

Very few people look forward to a dental visit. Some people are so afraid of going to the dentist that the very thought of a dental appointment makes their heart race and their palms sweat. Other people just feel slightly anxious on the day of the dental appointment. A lot of people are somewhere in between.

Determining how high your fear level is will help you decide what types of methods you need to be comfortable getting dental care. In this booklet, we will refer to a scale of 1 to 10 to rate patients' fears of dental care. Our rating of 1 is a patient who feels just slightly anxious about going to the dentist and may be able to relax with a massage pad, listening to music on headphones, or watching a video. A rating of 10 is a patient who experiences a complete panic attack when going to the dentist and absolutely feels they cannot cope without being fully asleep.

Think about how you would rate your dental fear level as you consider the methods available to ease your anxiety.



### **3. How can a dentist deal with anxiety?**

Our practice focuses on the care of fearful patients, and we've discovered that there are many things we can do to ease your fears. We take time to meet our patients and listen to their concerns. We have private rooms, stereo headphones, overhead videos, and massage pads — all designed to help you relax and to help you think about something other than your dental treatment. In addition to our calming atmosphere, we also have a range of medications and treatment techniques we can use to help reduce anxiety, as you will discover in this booklet.

### **4. Isn't pain just a part of going to the dentist?**

*Absolutely not!*

Getting dental care in modern times should not include experiencing pain. We have many ways to control pain and can work with you to determine what you need. We have advanced techniques and specialized syringes to get anesthetic to the places it needs to reach to work. We use topical anesthetics and gentle injection techniques to control discomfort during injections. Physical blocking of pain transmission is now achievable. You should not experience pain while getting dental care. However, if you've had problems with pain control in the past, a lack of anesthesia may have been only part of the problem.

### **5. What if I have a problem with gagging?**

Often, patients who are more sensitive to gagging when getting dental treatment will build up anxiety about gagging. This anxiety can act much like dental fear and can cause a patient to avoid getting dental care. This anxiety itself can make a patient more likely to gag during treatment. Many of the same treatments we use for reducing dental anxiety help patients with gagging problems relax, lessening their likelihood of gagging.

### **6. Does feeling nervous at the dentist make me more sensitive to pain?**

There is a connection between feeling nervous and being sensitive to pain. If you had problems being numb and comfortable in the past, your memory of dentistry may be extremely negative. Going to the dentist now brings out the fear of being hurt and uncomfortable again. When



you are extremely fearful, pain control alone will not create a comfortable experience for you.

The easiest way to understand how your brain works is to think about going to a scary movie. If you go to a scary movie, you'll likely get to a part where it's dark, it's storming, you're watching a spooky setting like a graveyard, and they've been playing creepy discordant music at you — then something flashes in front of you. You jump. Usually, it's something hideous, like a maniac with a chain saw. But you'd still jump even if they flashed a picture of a bunny sitting in a field, because you're so keyed up in a negative way.

Now, if you're nervous about going to the dentist, it can cause the same feeling. If you're sitting in the chair waiting for something terrible to happen, your mind is saying, "I'm really worried. I'm really worried. What's that? What's that? I don't like that. It feels funny. I think that hurts." If you are really keyed up in a negative way, you will pick up a vibration, sound, or cold sensation and jump like you would at a movie.

The human mind is a bit touchy, which doesn't help matters. The brain is the "central processing unit," or computer, that tells you how to interpret sensations. It may tell you that something hurts and may give you a false sensation of pain when you aren't actually experiencing pain. And it never helps if the dentist says, "Oh that couldn't possibly hurt," because your brain told you it did and that's what you listen to.

That's why, in order to have a reasonable experience at the dentist, your anxiety level needs to be reduced. Then your brain (the interpretive center) won't be so keyed up waiting for something awful to happen. Reducing your anxiety will keep your brain from telling you that relatively normal sensations are something terrible that you need to escape. With reduced anxiety, you don't have false pain perceptions.

## **7. Will I always be afraid of going to the dentist?**

We have found that when our patients have positive, pain-free experiences at the dentist, their fear of future appointments is slightly reduced. Over time, with numerous positive experiences, you may discover your strong fear has been reduced to a mild anxiety. If you



choose a form of anxiety control that leaves you with no or little memory of your appointment, you may be slower to retrain your brain to stop fearing the dentist. That's why we encourage patients, if possible, to use an anxiety-control measure that is strong enough to control their fear but still leaves them with a memory of their appointment.

If you think of my movie example, you'd jump the first time they flashed a picture of the bunny in the field after the creepy music. You may jump a little the second time they do it. The third time you might shift in your chair a little. But by the fifth time, you'd be ignoring all of the creepy noise and be pretty relaxed, feeling confident that nothing terrible was about to happen. The same things start to happen in the dental office after having some good experiences. Patients tend to need less medication and say, "Can we use less?" Well, yes, that's part of the goal.

## **8. So what do I do next?**

It is best to think about your level of dental fear and learn about the pain and anxiety controls available. We are happy to talk to our patients — and potential patients — about these choices and help them develop a treatment plan that meets their needs.





# The 8 Ways We Use to Reduce Anxiety and Fear of Dental Care

## **1. An Empathetic Dentist and Staff:**

Perhaps the first aspect of fear control is developing a comfortable working relationship with a dentist and staff. It isn't enough to find a dentist who knows how to sedate you. We have a wide range of anxiety-reduction skills, combined with empathy about your fears.

A dentist and staff who are empathetic, or at least sympathetic, about your dental anxiety will treat you differently and make different decisions about large and small matters. We understand that there isn't anything wrong with you just because you experience dental fears. There are lots of people who are phobic about getting dental care, yet are very daring in other parts of their lives.

In our dental clinic, the staff has dental-fears training and is empathetic, treatment rooms are private, and you can get the support you need.

**Here are some steps we take to help our fearful patients get dental care. These are things that may be different about our office.**

- **Calm waiting room**  
(so you don't get nervous)
- **Discussions about anxiety and its control**
- **Private rooms**  
(so we can talk and take you out of view of other patients, which eases feelings of potential embarrassment)
- **Explanations of procedures and options**  
(so you can be assured we have reasoned out what we're doing with you, and you can understand the treatment in advance)
- **Topical anesthetic applied to numb your gums before injections**



- **Nonpainful, gentle injections**  
(which we give you signals to control if you have any discomfort)
- **Control to stop the procedure with a hand signal by you, for whatever reason**
- **Coordination with physicians when medications or sedatives are needed and your medical history is significant**

## **2. Distraction Techniques:**

The first and simplest method to help ease anxiety is to give you something else to focus on to distract you. This can include a variety of things that add both comfort and distraction. We have soothing massage pads on the dental chairs in our office. We also have headphones and a variety of music. Our patients can even lie back and watch a movie on an overhead TV. All of these things are designed to help you tune us out by giving you something else on which to focus. For some mildly nervous patients, distraction techniques may be all they need to calm their nerves. Other more anxious patients may combine some of these distraction techniques with other relaxation options.

## **3. Fear Counseling and Stress Reduction:**

Some people who are afraid of going to the dentist benefit from getting fear counseling and stress-reduction training. We have trained with the University of Washington Dental Fears Clinic. We can work with you and/or along with psychologists in Bellingham or at the UW Dental Fears Clinic to teach you muscle-relaxation techniques, relaxation breathing, and mental imagery. These techniques, similar to Lamaze childbirth classes, can teach you how to help yourself to reduce anxiety. We also use role-playing desensitization techniques to gradually reduce anxiety in dental situations.

Similar to self-hypnosis techniques, once mastered, these methods are with you for life and can be used in any fear situation. For people who wish to try to avoid sedatives or reduce the dosage of sedatives, they do work. These techniques take a few visits to learn, require effort and practice, and, between the dental office and the psychologist, tend to cost in the moderate range.



## **Sedation Options**

Another way of reducing anxiety is through the use of sedating, anti-anxiety medications. These medications work on anxiety centers in the brain and have a calming effect. They differ in strength of sedation, side effects, cost and complexity, need for recovery time, need for escorts, and memory of the procedure. These will be presented from weak to strong:

### **4. Nitrous Oxide:**

Nitrous oxide is a gas that you breathe in through your nose. Because you don't use it until you get to the office and its effects wear off shortly after you stop inhaling it, you don't need an escort to and from the appointment. Costs are less than any other method of sedation. This treatment will handle anxiety of about up to 6 on the 1-to-10 scale. You can return to work or activities feeling fairly normal about 20 minutes after your treatment. You will remember the appointment.

The negatives are that some people get queasy when they are at or near the point of relaxation, and nitrous oxide is not usually enough by itself to control anxiety above a 6 on a 1-to-10 scale. People who are more nervous than 6 will usually still be uncomfortable with this option.

### **5. Single-Dose Oral Sedation:**

The next option for anxiety control in our office is a single dose of medication taken orally. For this option, we have to do some advance work with forms, as well as take your pulse and blood pressure. Sometimes, we also talk with your physician in advance. We prescribe medications like Valium or Lorazepam for your appointment. You take the medication at home about 1 to 2 hours before your appointment. You'll start to feel more relaxed about 20 minutes later. Because of the drug's effects, you'll need a ride to and from the office. You'll be placed on vital-sign monitors at the office. We sometimes will add nitrous oxide, usually at a reduced dose.

This choice will handle anxiety in the 7 range on a 1-to-10 scale. If you're determined to get through a shorter appointment, you may be able to "will power" your way though, even if your anxiety is slightly higher than that. Cost is higher than nitrous oxide but lower than other methods per



appointment block in our office, based on the need for monitoring and the extra time required to keep you comfortable.

The positives for this choice include being more relaxed compared with nitrous oxide alone, less fuss and expense than with more complex sedative techniques, and we can usually use this technique even if you are on other medications or have some medical problems. You will remember a lot of the appointment. This has been our most used technique beyond nitrous oxide alone. We've successfully treated people this way thousands of times.

The negatives to this technique are the additional cost and preparation. Also, patients need an escort and to limit work and activities for the rest of the day. This choice will not usually keep people with an 8 or above level of anxiety comfortable for a long appointment.

## **6. Multiple-Dose Oral Sedation:**

The next level of sedation potency uses Triazolam or Lorazepam, medications similar to Valium. In this technique, we check preoperative vital signs and perform a check with your physician when needed. We complete paperwork and forms before the appointment for dental work. Some patients on other sedating medications will not be eligible for this technique.

You will take 1 to 2 tablets at home about 1 to 2 hours before coming to the office. You will start to feel relaxed in about 20 minutes. You will need an escort to the office and home. You will need to rest the remainder of the day. You will need to arrive at the office 1 to 1 1/2 hours before dental work is performed. You'll be placed on a pulse and blood-pressure monitor. We will administer up to a maximum safe dose of more medication orally during the time prior to starting dental work, until you tell us you're sleepy enough (or you are dozing). We will sometimes add nitrous oxide gas as part of that appointment as well.

You may doze through about 1/2 of the appointment. You can still respond to questions and be awoken easily. This technique will handle anxiety in the 8 range of a 1-to-10 scale.



However, it will not handle 9 or above on a 1-to-10 scale. This technique also doesn't seem to enable patients to use "will power" or "tough it out." It works by making you sleepy. Cost is more than the previously discussed methods because of preappointment arrival for medication dosing and monitoring. You will remember very little of the appointment and will have a decreased memory of that day.

## **7. Intravenous Sedation:**

The next level of sedation potency is to use medications that are administered through an intravenous line (IV). Patients undergo a preoperative evaluation. You are usually given some medication to take 1 to 2 hours before coming to the office to help you relax. Upon arriving, you will be placed on a pulse and blood-pressure monitor. An IV is then started. Relaxing medications are then administered through the IV. Patients can safely be brought to a level of moderate sedation even if they are very nervous, resistant to sedatives, or both. You will need an escort to the office and home. You will need to rest the remainder of the day. You'll want to have someone with you the remainder of the day to help monitor pain medications.

This method of sedation will control anxiety for patients up to a level 9 on a 1-to-10 scale. Patients can also be moderately sedated with intravenous medications even if they do not achieve moderate sedation with safe doses of oral medications. The intravenous medications can be given in more potent doses, but as they are shorter acting, patients can safely leave the office after the appointment. As they can be adjusted easily, this form of sedation can be utilized for patients who aren't too sure about their anxiety level.

The challenges of intravenous sedation include needing an escort to and from our office, poor memory of the appointment, and needing the day off from work and activities. Costs are more significant because of the significant training, equipment, and supplies required to offer the procedures. Also, the other activities in the office during your appointment are very restricted.

For the patients who feel that their anxiety is a 10 on a 1-to-10 scale, this method may not be adequate. Although moderately sedated, you are not



asleep. This technique may not be a match for patients who are anxious about IVs. Also, patients who are developmentally delayed may not respond adequately with this technique.

## **8. General Anesthesia:**

The most potent option that we offer is general anesthesia with an anesthesiologist. In this method, patients whose health history permits it are put under general anesthesia in the office. This is similar to being put to sleep in the operating room of a hospital. You will need an escort to the office and home. You will need to rest the remainder of the day. You'll want to have someone with you the remainder of the day to help monitor pain medications.

Patients can be developmentally delayed or have some cognitive changes or be a 10 on a 1-to-10 scale of anxiety about their dental appointments and still be comfortably treated. An anesthesiologist is responsible for the sedation aspect of your care while we take care of the dentistry.

One disadvantage of this method is the challenge of scheduling your appointment at our office with the visiting anesthesiologist for the day. This can sometimes take 1 to 3 months to finalize the appointment day. You'll need an escort and to take the day off from work and activities.

There is no memory of the dental appointment. Also the costs are more significant. There are significant fees for the anesthesiologist. Our office fees include a minor administrative fee plus the fees for the dentistry, with an hourly average minimum. Some patients are not candidates for in-office anesthesia because of safety issues regarding medications or medical problems.



## Patient Testimonials

*"I suffer from a moderate case of dental anxiety, hence I am very sensitive about dental care, even to the point of neglecting checkups, etc. I have found that Dr. Yaremko's manner, and that of his staff, erases nearly all my fears. I have never met a dentist who is so concerned with his patient's comfort as Dr. Yaremko. He has the ability to put me at ease. I know he cares about the fact that I have dental anxiety, and he has the caring and skill to alleviate it." —Paul L*

*"I understood that my uncomfortable teenage experiences had left me with some very deep emotional reactions about dentistry. I had become a dentist who was dental-phobic."*  
—Eric Yaremko, DMD, PS



# How We Can Help

## **Planning for a Lifetime of Healthy Teeth:**

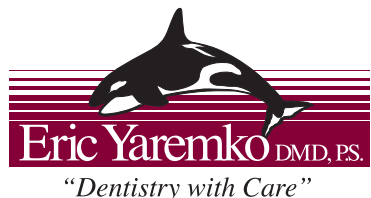
By now, you realize that we can handle any level of dental anxiety, even if we have to put you to sleep to manage it. There are less expensive, simpler techniques that can make the dental treatment possible and potentially more practical. At our practice, we ask people to use the simplest technique that they would feel comfortable using. But we also want patients to be realistic and not underestimate their anxiety. If you know you have a high level of anxiety and choose to not have enough sedation, you may experience such a strong anxiety reaction that we won't be able to complete your treatment that day. In those cases, patients still are partially billed for their scheduled appointment block. We don't want you to ever have a bad day at the dentist. It makes going to the dentist tougher in the future. The goal is to do what is needed to get short-term treatment needs done, then maintain your teeth in the long term with regular appointments. We've been successful at this literally thousands of times.

## **Afraid to Go to the Dentist? We Can Help.**

Congratulations. By reading this booklet about dental fears, you have taken the first step toward dealing with your dental fears. We hope you will consider calling Eric Yaremko, DMD, to schedule an appointment for your dental care. New patients are always welcome.

**EricYaremkoDMD.com**

**360.734.6620**





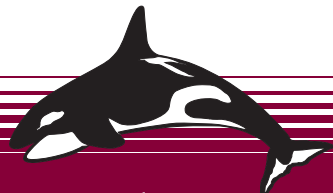
# About Dr. Yaremko

Dr. Eric Yaremko has over 30 years of experience as a dentist. He blends his experience with ongoing training in the latest dental techniques. He is committed to helping people overcome their dental fears and successfully get the dental treatment they need for a long and healthy life.



Dr. Yaremko has a doctorate in dentistry from the University of Connecticut (1985) and completed a one-year, full-time postdoctoral residency at the University of Washington Hospital. He has completed advanced training in reconstructive and rehabilitative dentistry, esthetic care, and treatment of people with dental fears. He is a member of the American Dental Association, the Washington State Dental Association, the Mount Baker District Dental Association, and the Dental Organization for Conscious Sedation; is a mentor for the reconstructive dentistry facility at the Kois Center in Seattle; and is a founding member and regular contributor to the Washington Creating Restorative Excellence study club and was voted by other dentists to a position in America's Best Dentists.

Dr. Yaremko has maintained a private general dental practice in Bellingham, WA, since 1990, with a special emphasis on dental reconstructive care and management of the dentally anxious patient.



**New Patients Always Welcome**

**360.734.6620 for appointments**

**[EricYaremkoDMD.com](http://EricYaremkoDMD.com)**



