

Management of the anxious patient in the dental office

Managementul pacientului anxios în cabinetul stomatologic

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Abstract

Background. Anxiety is widely known in dentistry. Even though it is a very recurrent issue, no protocol has yet been established that could be used for definite results.

Aims. The aim was to review the literature in order to find effective strategies employed by dentists that could help patients to overcome their anxiety.

Methods. A review of 24 articles on Pubmed platform using the terms: “dental anxiety”, “physical activity”, “sports” and “exercise” was conducted. We chose publications discussing the possible solutions for managing dental anxiety.

Results. The solutions proposed in the scientific literature included: cognitive-behavioral therapy, relaxation techniques, premedication with sedative drugs (benzodiazepine), music distraction, hypnosis, acupuncture, inhalation sedation, aromatherapy with essential oils, parental presence/absence for children and audiovisual distraction.

Conclusions. Cognitive-behavioral therapy seemed to be the most efficient method for patients to overcome dental anxiety. Repeated exposure to dental treatment increased the efficiency of the other strategies.

Key words: dental anxiety, physical activity, cognitive-behavioral therapy, dental treatment

Rezumat

Premize. Anxietatea este foarte des întâlnită în timpul tratamentului stomatologic. Chiar dacă mulți dintre pacienți sunt anxioși în cabinetul stomatologic, nu există un protocol specific, care să poată fi utilizat pentru rezultate sigure.

Obiective. Scopul acestui studiu a fost de a explora literatura de specialitate pentru a afla soluțiile pe care medicii dentiști le pot folosi, pentru a ajuta pacienții să își depășească anxietatea.

Metode. S-a realizat o revizuire a 24 de articole găsite cu ajutorul termenilor “anxietate dentară” pe platforma Pubmed. Au fost selectate publicații care aveau în vedere posibilele soluții care au fost studiate și au relevat rezultate pozitive în eliminarea anxietății dentare.

Rezultate. Soluțiile propuse în literatura de specialitate au fost: terapia cognitiv-comportamentală, tehnicile de relaxare, premedicația cu medicamente sedative (benzodiazepină), muzica pentru distragerea atenției, hipnoza, acupunctura, sedarea inhalatorie, aromaterapia cu uleiuri esențiale, prezența/absența părinților în cabinet pe parcursul efectuării manoperelor stomatologice la pacienții copii și distracția audiovizuală.

Concluzii. Terapia cognitiv-comportamentală este cea mai eficientă tehnică utilizată pentru a ajuta pacienții să își depășească anxietatea în cabinetul stomatologic. Toate tehnicile folosite au fost mai eficiente atunci când au fost asociate cu expunerea repetată la tratamentul stomatologic.

Cuvinte cheie: anxietate dentară, activitate fizică, terapie cognitiv-comportamentală, tratament stomatologic.

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Introduction

Patient anxiety is a very well known and frequent problem that dental practitioners encounter in the dental office. Although often regarded as an insignificant problem and not given very much attention, dental anxiety could have serious consequences, including aggravation of the dental problems the patient already has. This is the result of patients avoiding going to the dentist in the initial stages, when their dental problems could be treated much easier and faster, and with less financial investment. This delay of treatment usually increases the level of dental anxiety and affects the patient's quality of life, due to pain and other unpleasant repercussions of the worse dental problems.

When trying to understand anxiety, there are three terms that must be distinguished: fear, anxiety, and phobia. Fear is a basic emotion that emerges when a person perceives a present or a future danger. Anxiety is a conditioned reaction that arises in anticipation of a future threat (Gordon et al., 2013). Phobia is an irrational fear (Craske et al., 1996).

There are certain factors, different for each individual, which can amplify dental anxiety, such as: dental traumas, predisposing personality or characteristics, and exaggerated sensory and emotional reactions to pain (Locker et al., 1999a; Locker et al., 1999b). These factors are partly responsible for influencing the effectiveness of the strategies used to diminish patient anxiety during dental treatment (Gordon et al., 2013).

Numerous methods, many of them combined with cognitive-behavioral therapy, have been tested in an attempt to eliminate dental anxiety (Gordon et al., 2013).

Despite the wide range of methods that proved to help patients to overcome their dental anxiety, none of these strategies had guaranteed results and, at the present moment, there is no reliable protocol that doctors could apply to completely eliminate anxiety.

The aim of this review was to find out if there is an efficient noninvasive method for eliminating anxiety in dental patients.

Hypothesis

Is there a strategy that could eliminate patient anxiety in the dental office?

Material and methods

The search on Pubmed platform used the terms: "dental anxiety", "physical activity", "sports" and "exercise". Out of the results retrieved using these terms, only the articles from the last eight years were taken into consideration; moreover, only articles that included solutions were selected; papers that only assessed the anxiety frequency in the dental office were eliminated.

Results

The study focused on the anxiety level of patients who were informed in different manners about the dental procedure to be performed. Patients' anxiety decreased when they were explained the details of treatment. Also, helpful in reducing anxiety were images such as drawings of teeth on which the steps of treatment were explained. Additionally, the dentist's empathy toward the patient was

proved to be important (Wang et al., 2017).

Other studies revealed significantly lower levels of dental anxiety after exposing the patients to music therapy or audiovisual distraction (Mejia-Rubalcava et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2018).

Aerobic exercise was also used as a method with positive results in decreasing anxiety. A study reported lower dental anxiety in patients who performed physical activity 30 minutes prior to dental treatment. Decreased salivary cortisol and alpha amylase levels evidenced that physical activity could reduce fear of dental procedures (Lindenberg et al., 2016).

Other methods for decreasing dental fear mentioned in the literature were: cognitive-behavioral therapy, relaxation techniques, sedative premedication, hypnosis, acupuncture, inhalation sedation, aromatherapy. Among those techniques, cognitive-behavioral therapy gave the best results and it was also proven that repeated exposure to dental treatment was effective in reducing anxiety (Gordon et al., 2013).

Discussion

A very effective method for reducing dental anxiety is to inform patients about the causes that have led to their illness, to describe the therapeutic procedure and to discuss the results and risks that might occur during dental treatment. Patients' trust in doctors is enhanced by doctors' honesty regarding the risks to which patients are exposed during dental procedures. Once the patient's trust is gained, anxiety decreases because the patient feels in control of the dental treatment.

Music therapy and audiovisual distraction were proven to be beneficial for diminishing dental anxiety.

It was demonstrated that lack of physical activity was significantly associated with stress, anxiety and depression (Tajik et al., 2017; Hiles et al., 2017). Regular physical exercise was also shown to be correlated with good mental health (McMahon et al., 2017) and to reduce anxiety and depression symptoms (Carek et al., 2011; Lindwall et al., 2014). Lindenberger confirmed the above mentioned theories through his randomized controlled trial.

Conclusions

Dental practitioners must be aware of patients' anxiety and should consider one or more methods in their attempt to decrease it. So far, no definite protocol has been described in the literature that could guarantee complete elimination of dental anxiety.

Conflicts of interests

There are no conflicts of interests.

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