

## Strategies for Patient-Centered Care

### *Addressing Dental Anxiety with Empathy*

The following is a “Monday Morning Huddle Implementation Guide” for the implementation of practical strategies teams can use to enhance patient care workflow.

#### **Why This Matters:**

Dental anxiety is one of the most common barriers to effective oral health care. It influences whether patients:

- Schedule appointments
- Return for follow-up care
- Accept treatment recommendations
- Maintain preventive care

#### **Food for Thought:**

What often looks like "noncompliance" may actually be anxiety, uncertainty, or loss of trust.

Observations of anxiety can inform about how care is being experienced.

Small, consistent changes across the entire care team can improve trust, engagement, treatment acceptance, and long-term oral health outcomes.

#### **EXAMPLE: THIS WEEK'S TEAM ACTION PLAN**

Choose one action from each category.

<b>Communication</b>	<b>Patient Support</b>	<b>Environment</b>	<b>Workflow</b>
Update one phrase	Add a hand signal	Reduce visual clutter	Reserve anxiety-friendly appointments
Use Tell-Show-Do	Introduce breathing exercise	Offer headphones/music	Reduce wait times
Improve explanations	Normalize anxiety	Improve waiting area experience	Adjust scheduling practices

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### 1. COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES

**Benefits:** High Impact. Low Cost. Immediate Results.

#### Language Shapes Patient Experience

Instead of...	Try...
"This won't hurt."	"You may feel some pressure, and I'll guide you through each step."
"Relax."	"Many patients feel nervous during this part. Let me know what would help."
"You'll be fine."	"Let's take this one step at a time."
"There's nothing to worry about."	"It's completely understandable to feel nervous."

**Benefits:** Predictability Reduces Anxiety

#### Tell...Show... Do...

**Tell:** Explain what will happen in a clear speaking voice and eye-to-eye contact

**Show:** Demonstrate how dental instruments work in a safe and non-threatening fashion

**Do:** Perform the dental procedure exactly as previously explained and demonstrated

#### Example of a Monday Morning Huddle Discussion Topic

- What phrase does our team use most often that could be reframed to be more supportive?

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## **2. BEHAVIORAL & COGNITIVE APPROACHES**

**Benefits:** Helps Patients Regain a Sense of Control

### **Simple Anxiety-Reduction Strategies**

#### **Establish a Hand Signal**

Allows patients to:

- Pause treatment when needed
- Ask questions at any point during their visit
- Build a trusted connection (feeling that their experience matters)

#### **Normalize Anxiety**

Sample language:

"Many people feel nervous about dental treatment. You're not alone."

#### **Offer a Breathing Technique (e.g. Box Breathing)**

**Inhale** for 4 seconds

**Hold** inhale for 4 seconds

**Exhale** for 4 seconds

**Hold** exhale for 4 seconds

Repeat 2–3 cycles or as needed.

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#### Sample Team Huddle Discussion Topics

- **At what point in the patient journey do patients seem most anxious?**
  - Check-in
  - Waiting room
  - X-rays
  - Routine cleaning
  - Injection
  - Procedure explanation
  - During treatment
  - Checkout
- **What can we do differently at each point?** (Keep a running list of ideas and suggestions.)

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### **3. ENVIRONMENTAL & SENSORY MODIFICATIONS**

**Benefits:** Small Changes Can Make a Big Difference

#### **Conduct an Anxiety Audit**

Work through a simulation exercise where team members imagine they are a nervous first-time patient.

#### **What do patients hear?**

- Loud equipment
- Clinical conversations
- Phones ringing
- Calm environment

#### **What do patients see?**

- Instruments in view
- Cluttered surfaces
- Welcoming environment
- Clear signage

#### **What do patients smell?**

- Strong clinical odors
- Neutral/pleasant environment

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Examples of environmental improvements that can be easily tested and adjusted:

#### **Waiting Area**

- Comfortable seating
- Calming music
- Reduced clutter
- Clear communication about wait times

#### **Operatory**

- Explain equipment before use
- Keep instruments out of sight when possible
- Offer music or headphones
- Check in periodically during treatment

#### **Sample Team Huddle Discussion Topics**

- **What are some reoccurring observations about our patients' reactions to our office/clinic environment?**

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#### **4. TEAM-BASED INTEGRATION**

**Benefits:** Reducing Anxiety is a Group Effort

#### **Touchpoint Matters**

Patient experience is shaped by multiple touchpoints during their visit (including: Front Desk Reception, Waiting Area, Dental assistant, Healthcare Provider, Checkout).

Considerations for Front Desk-Patient Interactions:

**When a Patient Says:** "I hate going to the dentist."

**Avoid dismissing concerns:** "Don't worry."

**Try reframing to communicate care:** "Thank you for sharing that. We'll make sure the team knows so we can support you."

#### **When a Patient Hasn't Been Seen in Years**

**Avoid comments that can sound judgmental:** "Wow, it's been a long time."

**Try reframing to communicate inclusion:** "We're glad you're here today."

#### **Sample Team Huddle Discussion Topics**

- **Which scheduling adjustment could help our anxious patients most?**

#### **Sample Anxiety-Informed Scheduling**

- First appointment of the day
- Additional time to allow for demonstrations
- Reduce waiting periods
- Schedule complex procedures earlier

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#### 5. TRACKING PROGRESS

**Benefits:** What Gets Measured Gets Improved

#### Monthly Anxiety-Informed Practice Scorecard

Metric	Current	Long-term Goal	Action Plan for the Month
Missed Appointment Rate			
Treatment Acceptance Rate			
Recall Compliance Rate			
Patient Retention Rate			
Patient Experience Score*			

**\*Patient Experience Question** (asked after each patient visit)

"Do you feel that your concerns were listened to and respected during your visit today?"

Rating: 1 - 5

(5-YES, all my concerns were addressed; 1-NO, none of my concerns were addressed)

#### Sample Team Huddle Discussion Topics

Before our next monthly Team Meeting, we will:

- Replace one anxiety-provoking phrase
- Introduce one patient-control strategy
- Implement one environmental improvement
- Make one scheduling adjustment
- Begin tracking one patient experience measure

**Reflection topic:** If I were an anxious patient walking into our office tomorrow, what is one thing we could do differently that would help me feel safer?

**Team Answers** (record for future discussions):