



Dan Hubig

## Advances, Understanding Help Alleviate Fear

By Dell Richards

**A**s a kid, Daniel Vaillancourt was so afraid of the dentist, he had to be put to sleep to have fillings. For exams and cleanings, nitrous oxide was the only way to handle his fear.

"I was kicking and screaming and trying to bite the dentist," said the Los Angeles screenwriter. "Even at the pediat-

ric dentist, they put a 'Pinocchio nose' on me with gas in it."

As dentists know, fear causes many people to neglect their teeth. Not so for Vaillancourt, who goes regularly, despite the fact he has to be numbed for a cleaning, uses calming imagery to get through the visit, and will begin hyperventilating

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if a procedure takes too long.

Fear also means the practice of dentistry itself can be more stressful for the dentist.

Luckily, new technologies have come on the market that help deal with patient anxiety. Psychological remedies such as hypnotherapy also are gaining acceptance. Unlike many dentists who find the anxiety rubs off — making the experience worse for everyone — some dentists feel that bringing patients back to health through dentistry is part of their calling.

The Alpha-Stim recently became available in the United States, although dentists in the United Kingdom have used it for a number of years.

FDA-approved for anxiety, depression, and insomnia, Eric Hassid, MD, also uses it for pain management with his neurological rehabilitation patients. “We use a lot of modalities in our pain program, but to be very honest, the (cranial electro-therapy stimulator) unit is one of the most effective,” said the medical director of the Davis Institute for Restorative Health.

The Alpha-Stim takes advantage of the electrical potential that crosses the cell membrane that facilitate chemical reactions. According to the manufacturer, the unit moves electrons through the brain at a variety of frequencies, collectively known as harmonic resonance, which normalizes the electrical activity of the brain.

Like a transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation, or TENS, unit, it allows the patient to control the flow, lack of control being a key problem for many dental patients, though at a lower current.

Hassid uses the cranial electrotherapy stimulator that calms anxiety and creates a sense of well-being, and the microcurrent electro-therapy stimulator for pain,

inflammation, and healing.

“By changing the chemical mediators, you see better control of anxiety and insomnia with the CES,” said the Davis doctor of the CES unit. “The (microcurrent electro-therapy) is a stealth bomber for areas that need help with pain.”

Anything that changes the perception of pain also increases or decreases pain. “If you look at pain, perception can alter the pain response by as much as 50 percent,” Hassid said.

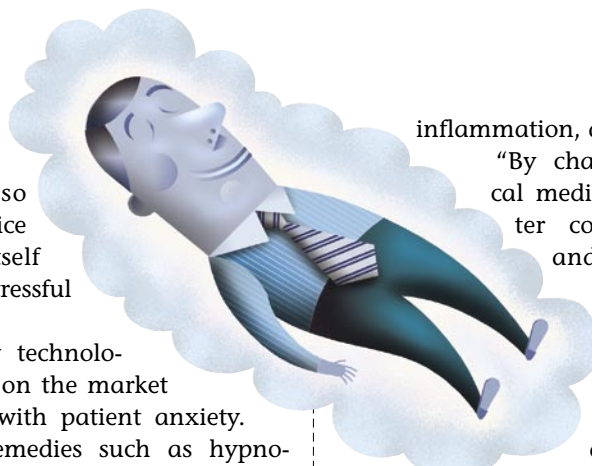
This understanding also allows more dentists to embrace psychological aids such as hypnotherapy and guided visualization. Both these tools can help people replay the experience in their imagination to transform it from negative to positive. Like a basketball player who visualizes making hoop after hoop, this type of internal imagery can work wonders over time.

“It gives people a way to experience going to the dentist in their mind’s eye in a positive way,” said Lena Kibble, MFT, “which gives them a better frame of reference.”

To be effective, guided visualizations often must be done many times. “For some people, they have to do it 50 times or more to deal with particular fears.”

Although most people blame prior experiences with the dentist or enculturation from society, other factors often contribute. “Although patients can learn from the parents and siblings, people can be prone to anxiety because of genetics,” the Napa and Sonoma psychotherapist said. “It can also mean you have been traumatized in some other way.”

Having a dentist who acknowledges the patient’s struggle is essential. “Dentists need to show that they really appreciate



the effort the patient has made to get there,” Kibble said. “Just giving medicine is not enough. They need to say something to acknowledge the struggle and the positive step the person has taken.”

More dentists are starting to do that. Scott Snyder, DDS, is willing to put in extra time to deal with phobic patients. “Taking the time to find out what specifically the patient doesn’t like gives me the opportunity to get to know the patient better,” the Sacramento general dentist said. “From their past experiences, I find out where they’re from and what they’re about, things I always enjoy.”

Snyder also has patients bring a buddy to the office. “Using the buddy system makes sure the person doesn’t come up

with some last-minute excuse to get out of it,” Snyder said. A friend also gives them someone to talk to while waiting.

Being willing to admit the invasiveness of working in someone’s mouth also helps the process of acceptance. “It all leads back to communication,” said Snyder.

Sometimes dentists get so carried away by their own technical prowess, they forget what the experience is like for the vast majority of people. “They forget that going to the dentist is like having surgery,” Kibble said. “Dentistry has come a long way, but it hasn’t come that far.”

*A practicing journalist, Dell Richards runs Dell Richards Publicity, a public relations firm specializing in dentistry, health care and technological innovation.*

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