

# Optimism and humour can help to combat dental fear

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Optimism and humor can help to combat dental fear. Credit: Photo: University of Gothenburg

Scientists at the Sahlgrenska Academy, University of Gothenburg, Sweden, have investigated the strategies used by people who suffer from dental fear to cope with dental treatment. Some of the most important factors in managing stress during a visit to the dentist include optimism on the part of the patient and an atmosphere of humour in the interaction with the dental staff.

In an international perspective, about 50% of the [adult population](#) suffer from some degree of dental fear, making it one of the most common fears. In its most serious form it can cause [extreme stress](#) and lead to people avoiding dental care altogether, thus dental fear turned into dental phobia.

## Fiver percent have severe dental fear

Despite this, most people, and this include many of the approximate 5% of the population who suffer from severe dental fear, do go to the dentist regularly. In order to increase understanding of dental fear and its causes, scientists from the Sahlgrenska Academy at the University of Gothenburg have in two unique studies investigated the strategies people with dental fear use to cope with visiting the dentist, including dental treatment.

## Five strategies to overcome

In one study, Jenny Bernson and her colleagues asked people suffering from dental fear to complete a questionnaire, and the researchers could identify five principal strategies used to overcome dental fear:

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

"The study has shown that [patients](#) who adopt an optimistic mindset cope with [dental treatment](#) significantly better and they visit the dentist more regularly than patients who spend their time in prayer, despair or

catastrophizing", says Jenny Bernson.

## **Humour most important**

The second study was based on interviews with patients suffering from dental fear, and the interviewed patients mentioned humour as one of the most important factors. "Psychological barriers can be broken down by humour, both as a result of the patient and the [dentist](#) coming together more as equals, and as a result of humour reducing stress, increasing well-being and creating a pleasant atmosphere", says Jenny Bernson.

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.

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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