

Going to the Dentist

Tips for Survivors of Sexual Assault

Some people who have survived sexual abuse or sexual assault may become upset, even years later, when they need to go to the dentist. This booklet talks about why that may be true, and tells you about things that might help you feel more calm and safe at the dentist office.

Were you forced by someone to do sexual things when you were a child?

Were you forced to do sexual things you did not want to do as a teenager or adult?

And now...

- Does it upset you to think about going to the dentist?
- Do you put off dental visits even when you have dental problems?
- Do you feel afraid when you are in the dental chair?

This booklet gives tips that may be helpful to you.



If I was sexually abused, why do I feel afraid at the dentist office?

Many, many people have had sexual abuse or sexual assault happen to them in their lives. The feelings that result from the abuse can last for a long time. Victims of sexual assault may have health problems caused by the assault, or they may be afraid to have a health exam because it brings back feelings connected to their past abuse.

Going to the dentist might be upsetting for victims of sexual assault or abuse. Many adults who were sexually abused as children or teens, or who were assaulted or raped as adults:

- Avoid going to the dentist
- Have trouble making or keeping dentist appointments
- Have dental problems caused by stress
- May feel severe distress while at the dentist*

These are some of the things that may make sexual assault survivors feel worried at the dentist:

- Being alone with a person who has more power than you
- Feeling that you are not in control over your body
- Laying down in the chair
- Being touched
- Having the dentist's hands and other objects put into your mouth
- Being unable to swallow or speak
- Expecting or feeling pain
- Feeling that you cannot leave quickly
- Not being able to trust other people to keep you safe

Many dentists know that people can be afraid for many reasons when they come in for dental care. Dentists and dentist office staff can learn to work together with patients to make dental visits less fearful or upsetting.

For survivors:

These things have helped other survivors deal with their fears about dental visits:*

Things that may help you feel in control at a dental visit...

- Tell the dentist what you are worried about.
- If you think it will be helpful, ask to keep the door to the exam room open - or ask to keep it closed if that works better for you.
- If it makes you afraid to lay down in the dental chair, ask to keep it in a sitting-up position.
- Ask for an x-ray apron if you want to be covered for the entire exam.
- Ask your dentist to explain everything that he or she is going to do.
- Ask your dentist to let you know if something is going to cause pain.
- Agree on a signal (such as waving your hand) that tells the dentist that you want him or her to STOP right away.
- Ask for a "break" if you need it.
- Tell your dentist when you feel afraid.

Things you can try before and during a dental visit...

- Slow, deep breathing
- Thinking about a safe place
- Telling yourself:
"I can get through this."
"It will be over shortly."
"I can tell the dentist to stop the dental work right away if I want to. The dentist will listen."
"I am safe now."
"I am taking care of my health."
"My teeth will be stronger when I'm done, and I am worth it."

*Adapted from Hays and Stanley, 1993

Other things that might be helpful...

- Ask to meet the dentist and staff BEFORE you have an appointment.
- Give a copy of this booklet to your dentist.
- Bring a friend to the visit. She or he can come to the dentist's office with you, and stay with you for the whole visit. Let the dentist know that someone will be with you in case they need to get an extra chair.
- Bring soothing music, if you think it will help you.
- Bring a comfort object to hold (such as a smooth rock).
- Wear long pants.
- Talk with your doctor or dentist about medication to help you relax. For some people this may be helpful. But be aware: if you were drugged or given alcohol as part of your assault, you may not want to take any medication that alters the way you feel.
- Ask the dentist to check with you to make sure any numbing medicine is working before the dentist starts any work on your teeth.
- Contact one of the Rape Crisis Centers listed at the end of this booklet. You can talk to a hotline counselor right up to the time of your visit. And you can plan to call again right after your visit.

More help...

A survivor who feels afraid to go to the dentist may find it helpful to talk to a sexual assault counselor. You (or your loved one) can get (free) counseling with a trained sexual assault counselor.

Counselors with special training work at Rape Crisis Centers all over Massachusetts. You can talk with a Counselor in person, or over the phone. Every Rape Crisis Center has a hotline that is open every day, 24/7.

If you want to, you can ask a counselor to meet you at your dentist office to support you during your appointment.

For more information about these free services, call a local Rape Crisis Center listed here:

**You are not alone.
Help is on hand.**

For information, free counseling services, or to find a counselor who will meet you at the dentist office, contact your local Rape Crisis Center:

BOSTON AREA:

Boston Area Rape Crisis Center (Boston and Cambridge)
Hotline: 800-841-8371
617-492-6434 (TTY)

NORTHEAST:

North Shore Rape Crisis Center (Lynn)
Hotline: 800-922-8772
781-477-2313 (TTY)

Rape Crisis Services of Greater Lowell / Center for Hope & Healing (Lowell)
Hotline: 800-542-5212
978-452-8723 (TTY)

YWCA of Greater Lawrence (Lawrence)
Hotline: 877-509-9922
978-686-8840 (TTY)

CENTRAL:

Pathways for Change (Worcester, Fitchburg)
Hotline: 800-870-5905
508-852-7600 (TTY)

Wayside / Valley Rape Crisis Program (Milford)
Hotline: 800-511-5070
508-478-4205 (TTY)

Voices Against Violence (Framingham)
Hotline: 800-593-1125
508-626-8686 (TTY)

[more rape crisis centers listed on next page]

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SOUTHEAST:

A New Day (Brockton, Quincy, Plymouth)

Hotline: 508-588-8255

508-894-2869 (TTY)

The Women's Center / New Bedford Women's Center

(New Bedford and Fall River)

Hotline: 508-999-6636

508-996-1177 (TTY)

New Hope (Attleboro, Taunton, Webster):

Hotline: 800-323-4673

800-323-4673 (TTY)

Independence House (Hyannis, Falmouth, Orleans, Provincetown)

Hotline: 800-439-6507

508-771-6762 (TTY)

A Safe Place (Nantucket)

Hotline: 508-228-2111

508-228-7095 (TTY)

CONNECT to end violence (Martha's Vineyard)

Hotline: 508-696-7233

508-693-6782 (TTY)

WEST:

Elizabeth Freeman Center (Pittsfield, Adams, North Adams, Great Barrington)

Hotline: 413-443-0089

413-499-2425 (TTY)

Everywoman's Center (Amherst)

Hotline: 413-545-0800

413-545-0800 (TTY)

NELCWIT (New England Center for Women in Transition) (Greenfield, Orange)

Hotline: 413-772-0806

413-772-0806 (TTY)

YWCA of Western Massachusetts (Springfield and Holyoke)

Hotline: 800-796-8711

413-733-7100 (TTY)

Statewide Spanish Language Hotline:

Llámanos Spanish Hotline for Survivors of Sexual Assault: 800-223-5001

More Resources....

Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN)

To find rape crisis centers nationwide: <http://centers.rainn.org/>

National Sexual Assault Hotline - 1.800.656.HOPE

What is the National Sexual Assault Online Hotline?

The National Sexual Assault Online Hotline is a free, confidential, secure service that provides live help over the RAINN website.

For additional resources: **National Sexual Violence Resource Center**

<http://www.nsvrc.org/>

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center serves as the nation's principle information and resource center regarding all aspects of sexual violence.

For more information on **Rape Prevention Education:**

<http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/RPE/states.html>

This booklet was adapted from a brochure developed by Sheila Stanley and Kate Hays, from the Womankind Center of New Hampshire and edited by the Sexual Assault Prevention & Survivor Services Program at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health.