

Revisiting Comfort

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Objective: The primary strand of research describing the provision of comfort in dental practices focuses on a small minority of the regular patient population, the dental phobic patient. Recent studies show that a higher percentage of patients than previously thought, up to 65%, are anxious in some way about their dental visit. We describe comforting strategies which were performed by dentists, dental assistants, and hygienists for their patient population as a whole.

Methods: As part of the Direct Observation Study, 120 dental practices in Ohio were observed over a 4 day period by trained research hygienists. Researchers observed and recorded 2,269 patient interactions with dentists and hygienists at 30 second intervals using 24 behavior-specific codes. In addition, researchers composed qualitative notes detailing specific provider-patient interactions.

Following established grounded-theory methodology, we utilized qualitative notes, field jottings, and in-depth debriefing session information to identify specific comforting actions performed by dentists, hygienists, and dental assistants.

Results: The qualitative notes revealed that while dental providers draw on a variety of comforting strategies, the most frequent behaviors observed included: environmental distractions, verbal responses to visual cues of patient discomfort, communicative behaviors and relaxation techniques, and pharmacologic tactics designed to alleviate physical pain.

All practices utilized *some* type of comforting behavior for *some* of their patients. However, the qualitative data reflected clear missed opportunities to provide comfort to needy patients. Statements and examples from the qualitative notes will illustrate the typology of these strategies and behaviors and how they are enacted during the dental visit.

Conclusion: Providing comfort to dental patients may play a role in the therapeutic relationship. While dental providers make use of a number of distinct comforting mechanisms to alleviate patient anxiety and pain, there is a significant range of utilization of these strategies.

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