

SUN Lifestyle

Tomorrow:
The flip-
flop flap



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■ DR. MICHAEL OPLER in his Image Dental Studio in Richmond Hill. His clinic offers other services normally found at a spa, upper right picture; inset below, Dr. Andrew Kay, a periodontist, is a traditionalist who believes in soothing a patient's fears by keeping them informed.

— Alex Urošević, SUN

JOANNE RICHARD
Toronto Sun

Soothing the fear factor in the dentist's chair

IF VISIONS of the whirring tooth drill and giant needles strike fear into your heart, you're not alone.

Dentist dread is alive and well — even a simple cleaning carries the fear factor for countless patients.

"We're associated with pain and discomfort; you can usually detect at least some amount of nervousness and mild anxiety on visits," says Dr. Michael Opler.

So operating under the assumption that most people greatly dislike dental visits, Opler has upped the pleasure factor at his dental office by incorporating some patient perks to soothe the senses and "make clients more comfortable so they don't feel like they're at the dentist."

Dental spas are a growing trend

and, at Opler's Image Dental Studio in Richmond Hill, clients kick back and get pampered in a spa-like atmosphere that includes the fragrance of fresh flowers and aromatherapy candles, a bubbling water fountain, soothing music, refreshments and fresh fruit are in abundance. Patients sink into a heated massage chair specially equipped with a state-of-the-art flat-screen TV and headphones and are offered complimentary paraffin treatments. Lemon-scented face cloths finish off each appointment.

"We do not want patients white-knuckling it — we want to make their visits pleasurable and have them leaving relaxed and reinvigorated," says Opler, who has 14 years experi-

ence in general and cosmetic dentistry. "Our priority is to provide appropriate treatment in a professional manner and, as an adjunct, we want to alleviate the smells, sounds and sensations in order to decrease anxiety."

Manicures, pedicures

Opler's not alone: A 2003 American Dental Association survey reveals that half of the 427 dentists interviewed offer extras, including headphones, neck rests, warm towels, drinks and snacks; 5% went as far as to offer massages, facials, manicures and pedicures.

But while pampering may help calm most patients, it's not enough to alle-

viate the fears of true dental phobics, including Josie Anderson, who avoided dentists for 12 years. Fear stole her smile and resulted in neglect to her dental health, causing major problems.

Extreme gum infection and pain ultimately took over and forced her to open wide, but not until another relaxation technique was employed — sedation dentistry — in order to get her the help she needed.

"My fears stem from my horrible childhood experiences with dentists — they drilled without pain relief and now I get physically ill just being in a dental office," says Anderson, 46.

Today fearful patients can be easily sedated using laughing gas, pills or even IV anesthesia to a complete gen-



— Stan Behal, SUN

■ DR. ANDREW KAY, a periodontist, is a former dental phobic.



— Alex Urošević, SUN



— Ernest Doroszuk, SUN

■ **DR. WAYNE WOLFSTADT** provides a variety of conscious sedation techniques to calm his patients' fears.

eral anesthetic, says Dr. Andrew Kay, a former dental phobic himself.

"I remember as a kid getting nauseous driving by the dentist's office," says Kay, a periodontist specializing in gums and dental implants at his Yonge and Eglinton office. "I'm a lot better now."

Kay's experiences have helped him alleviate his patients' anxieties by "letting them know I've gone through the same fears."

Kay says the key to alleviating anxiety is educating, informing and comforting clients: "I'm a traditionalist

and don't believe in getting your hair done while having your gums done."

Helping the jittery patient comes, says Kay, "in listening to a patient's fears — avoidance behaviour can turn a little problem into a major one. You have to listen, offer empathy and not minimize what the patient is going through."

Horror stories

According to Dr. Wayne Wolfstadt, a dentist for 24 years, the most common reasons for dental fear are pre-

vious painful or negative experiences or horror stories told by friends.

"Some people are so afraid that they let things go — teeth break down, there are gum problems and sometimes their teeth even fall out," says Wolfstadt, who practices in Toronto and provides a variety of conscious sedation techniques, including nitrous oxide (laughing gas), a pill before dental appointments or a light intravenous sedation to make the appointment a comfortable experience — and to alleviate patients' dental fears and anxieties.

"People get so afraid of dentists that it compromises their overall health," says Wolfstadt.

In fact, dental phobia is an irrational, paralyzing fear of seeking dental care and, according to DentalFear.net, 50% of the American population do not seek regular dental care because of the anxiety of going to the dentist — 9% to 15% are so phobic that they avoid care altogether.

Endodontist Dr. Andrew Moncarz, of EndoAsleep on York Mills Rd., not only specializes in root canal therapy but has advanced training in dental anesthesiology, which helps even the most nervous patient get the stress-free dental help he/she needs.

Baby boomers

Moncarz's mandate is to make the dental visit "as positive an experience as possible. Most patients (can handle a dental visit) but there is a certain select few that we see who suffer problems of phobias." Moncarz notes that baby boomers in particular feel fear "due to negative experiences they suffered when they were younger. I think today we have a better understanding of the biology and techniques needed as far as patient management goes in order to minimize and alleviate discomfort."

Take the idea of sedation, says Moncarz. "We treat (nervous patients) under sedation, which serves as an adjunct to make the dental experience a non-event — a positive experience, in other words.

Stepping into the dental office

According to Sleepfordentistry.com/Dentalphobia dental phobia can be devastating:

"It is estimated that 20% of the population is dental phobic and upwards of 50% of us harbor some reservations about visiting the dentist. These feelings can lead to people avoiding their regular check-ups and hygiene visits, thus compromising their oral health."

The website states maintaining a healthy oral environment is very important to one's overall well-being. There have been recent links in the scientific literature concerning poor periodontal health (gum disease) and heart disease. The link between these two diseases may involve the plaque around our teeth and the plaque that can clog our arteries. Other more obvious perils of avoiding regular dental care include decay and gum disease as mentioned. Yet despite knowledge of these risks, people who are dental phobic still have trouble walking through the office door.

Dental anxiety and phobia can develop in different people for different reasons. Sometimes it's the result of a past negative experience, common in adults who, when children 40 or 50 years ago, went to the dentist and had a painful filling or extraction. Back then, local anesthesia was not as predictive and

profound as it is today and the kids who have dental work now are not experiencing the discomfort during the procedures that their parents did.

As well, there is much more emphasis put on pain control. If any patient feels anything untoward, the dentist will stop and achieve better pain control before the procedure is recommenced. Back about 50 years ago, the emphasis was probably on finishing the procedure, regardless of the discomfort.

To make matters worse, the mouth is a very sensitive and intimate part of the body. It takes a great deal of trust to have someone working in that space and this trust comes more easily for some than it does for others.

Today there is a wide range of methods to help dental phobic individuals. Dental practitioners are well aware of the typical signs of dental phobia and are usually very sensitive towards these individuals.

"The key is taking that first step and walking into the (dental) office in the first place. Once they have gotten that far, there is a very high likelihood that they will find it is not nearly as scary as they thought it will be and will allow themselves to be treated."

— Courtesy of Sleepfordentistry.com and DentalFearCentral.com

No drill dentistry

Drill and fill may be a thing of the past.

Now there's a new dental treatment, HealOzone — it uses ozone to treat cavities without drilling.

In as little as 20 seconds, HealOzone eliminates 99% of cavity-causing bacteria, allowing the tooth to re-mineralize, and promotes the preservation of healthy tooth structure.

"It's no secret that most people do not like to go to the dentist because of fears and anxieties related to needles and drills. My patients are blown away when I now tell them that I can treat

their cavities without any freezing or drilling," says Dr. Stephen Gaines, an Oakville dentist who uses the HealOzone treatment on his patients.

"With the absence of the noise and vibration caused by the drill, it keeps them relaxed, and gets them on their way in no time at all."

The average drill and fill procedure takes about 35 minutes, whereas the average HealOzone treatment is 20 minutes from start to finish. Moreover, because freezing is seldom necessary, many areas of the mouth can be treated in one appointment.

"Ultimately, you want the patient to feel good enough in order to continue on the road to good oral hygiene."

Wolfstadt says severe dental anxiety can provoke anxiety responses including heart palpitations, feeling sick, nauseous and faint, as well as getting chest pains and the sweats.

According to a recently released University of Toronto study, 5.5% of the 1,100 Canadians polled are very afraid of seeing a dentist, with half of those so fearful that they've actually cancelled or avoided appointments altogether. And women are 2.5 times more likely than men to fear a visit to the dentist, the study reveals.

It's tough being in a profession immersed in a reputation of pain.

Opler doesn't take it personally, however. "I try not to let it get me down. In fact, I see it as a challenge as I strive to educate people that dental care doesn't have to hurt or be unpleasant. In many cases we're able to change people's perception by providing treatment painlessly and in an environment that decreases anxiety levels."

Preparing patients for what to expect before starting treatment often takes the "unknown" factor out, he adds.

Meanwhile, great grins are imperative in today's competitive corporate world. "Teeth are your essential accessory, a tremendous asset," says Opler. "The benefits of improving your smile are powerful."