

How to Choose a Dentist When You Have Dental Anxiety

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Description:

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Details:

Dental anxiety is more common than most people realise. Studies suggest that up to one in six Australian adults experience some level of fear or anxiety about visiting the dentist, and for many, that fear is severe enough to delay or avoid treatment altogether. If you are one of those people, you are not alone — and the good news is that modern dentistry has come a long way in making the experience more comfortable, more gentle, and far less intimidating than it used to be.

Choosing the right dentist when you have dental anxiety is not just about finding someone who is technically skilled. It is about finding a practice that understands your fear, respects your pace, and has the tools and training to help you feel safe. This guide walks you through the key factors to consider so you can make an informed choice and take the first step toward better oral health — on your terms.

Why Dental Anxiety Matters More Than You Think

Avoiding the dentist because of anxiety might feel like the easier option in the short term, but the long-term consequences can be significant. Untreated decay, gum disease, infections, and tooth loss are all more likely when regular check-ups are skipped. What starts as a small filling can become a root canal or extraction — which, ironically, tends to reinforce the fear that caused the avoidance in the first place.

Breaking this cycle starts with choosing a dentist who genuinely understands dental anxiety and has the experience and environment to support you through it.

Key Factors to Consider

1. Look for Dentists Who Specialise in Treating Anxious Patients

Not every dentist has specific training or experience in managing dental anxiety. When researching practices, look for clinicians who explicitly mention anxiety management as part of their approach. This is not just a marketing claim — it reflects a genuine commitment to adapting their communication style, treatment pace, and clinical approach to suit nervous patients.

At Core Dental, several clinicians have built their careers around helping anxious patients feel comfortable. Dr Lana Mettmann at Caroline Springs has a well-known passion for alleviating dental anxiety, with a strong focus on patient-centred care and tailored treatment plans. Dr Sally Joseph at Southbank is described by patients as gentle and kind, with a particular commitment to redefining the dental experience for anxious visitors. Dr Ella George, also at Caroline Springs, is passionate about helping patients with dental anxiety and special needs feel comfortable in the chair.

2. Ask About Sedation Options

For patients with moderate to severe dental anxiety, sedation can be a game-changer. There are several levels of sedation available in modern dental practices, and understanding your options helps you choose a practice that can meet your needs.

****Nitrous oxide (laughing gas)**** is one of the most common options. It is inhaled through a small mask during treatment, producing a calm and relaxed feeling. It wears off quickly, so most patients can drive themselves home afterward. Dr Jacalyn Madden at Core Dental Southbank is trained in nitrous oxide sedation, offering this option for patients who need a little extra help relaxing.

****Sleep dentistry (intravenous sedation)**** is available for patients who need a deeper level of sedation. Under sleep dentistry, you remain technically conscious but are unlikely to remember the procedure. Core Dental Epping and Core Dental Wyndham both offer sleep dentistry options for nervous patients, and Core Dental Berwick also provides sedation dentistry as part of its comprehensive service offering.

****Oral sedation**** involves taking a prescribed medication before your appointment to reduce anxiety. This is sometimes used for paediatric patients — Dr Angel Babu, a specialist paediatric dentist at Caroline Springs and Carrum Downs, offers treatment under oral sedation as well as nitrous oxide for children.

When choosing a dentist, ask specifically which sedation options are available and whether the clinician has direct experience administering them.

3. Evaluate the Practice Environment

The physical environment of a dental practice can significantly impact your anxiety levels. Look for practices that feel calm, modern, and welcoming rather than clinical and intimidating. Consider factors like natural lighting, comfortable waiting areas, and whether the practice uses modern equipment that tends to be quieter and less intrusive than older technology.

Core Dental's locations are designed with patient comfort in mind. The Epping clinic, for example, features advanced technology including CEREC same-day crowns and digital scanning — which means no uncomfortable physical impressions — along with laser dentistry that is often quieter and less invasive than traditional methods. These technological advances are not just about efficiency; they directly reduce the sensory triggers that many anxious patients find distressing.

4. Consider the Dentist's Communication Style

One of the biggest drivers of dental anxiety is feeling out of control or uninformed about what is happening. A good dentist for anxious patients will take the time to explain every step before it happens, check in with you regularly during treatment, and establish a clear signal (like raising your hand) that means "stop."

Dr Kia Pajouhesh, Principal Dentist and Managing Director of Core Dental Group, was himself motivated to pursue dentistry by a traumatic early dental experience. He has instilled throughout the Core Dental team the philosophy that patients should always be presented with options, given clear information, and empowered to make informed choices about their care. This patient-first communication style runs through the entire practice, not just individual clinicians.

5. Check for Multilingual Support

Dental anxiety can be amplified when there is a language barrier. If English is not your first language, being unable to fully understand what your dentist is saying — or to express your concerns — can make an already stressful situation much worse.

Core Dental engages clinicians who speak a range of languages including Mandarin, Cantonese, Farsi, Arabic, Bengali, Spanish, and Malay. Caroline Springs is the most multilingual location, with clinicians

speaking Arabic (Dr Sherin Gad), Bengali (Dr Anika Moyeed), and Farsi (Dr Shakiba Askary). At Epping, Dr Maria Blanchard speaks Spanish, while Dr Ivy Jin at Carrum Downs and Berwick speaks Mandarin.

Being able to communicate in your preferred language can make a significant difference in how comfortable and in control you feel.

6. Look for Flexible Scheduling and Emergency Access

For anxious patients, the anticipation of a dental visit can be as stressful as the visit itself. Practices that offer flexible scheduling — including early morning, evening, or Saturday appointments — allow you to choose a time when you feel most calm and least rushed.

All seven Core Dental locations across Melbourne are open six days a week, from 8:00 am to 6:00 pm Monday to Friday and Saturday mornings. Emergency same-day appointments are available at every location, so if you do experience a dental emergency, you will not have to endure prolonged waiting and worry.

7. Verify Credentials and Registration

Regardless of your anxiety level, it is important to verify that your dentist is properly qualified and registered. All practising dentists in Australia must be registered with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA). You can verify any dentist's registration online through the AHPRA website.

Every clinician at Core Dental is an ADA (Australian Dental Association) member, and all specialists — including orthodontists, periodontists, and paediatric dentists — hold specific AHPRA specialist registration in their field.

8. Consider a Practice That Offers Specialist Access

Sometimes dental anxiety has resulted in years of avoidance, which means the treatment needed may be more complex. In these cases, having access to specialists within the same practice can be invaluable. Rather than being referred to an unfamiliar specialist at a different location, you can see someone within the same trusted environment.

Core Dental offers on-site specialist access at several locations, including specialist paediatric dentists (Dr Angel Babu at Caroline Springs and Carrum Downs, Dr Sarah Scott at Berwick, and Dr Aish Kesava at Epping), a specialist periodontist (Dr Nupur Kataria at Wyndham), and a specialist orthodontist (Dr David Austin at Caroline Springs and Wyndham). This means even complex treatment can happen in a familiar setting with a team that already knows your history and anxiety triggers.

Red Flags to Watch For

While most dental practices strive to provide compassionate care, there are some warning signs that a practice may not be the right fit for an anxious patient:

- ****Dismissiveness about your anxiety.**** If a dentist or receptionist minimises your concerns or tells you to "just relax," that is a significant red flag. Your anxiety is valid and should be treated as a clinical consideration, not an inconvenience.
- ****Rushing through consultations.**** An initial consultation should feel unhurried, with plenty of time for questions. If you feel pressured to commit to treatment before you are ready, look elsewhere.
- ****No discussion of sedation or comfort options.**** A practice that does not proactively mention anxiety management strategies may not have the tools or training to support you effectively.
- ****Lack of transparency about costs.**** Financial anxiety compounds dental anxiety. Look for practices that provide written treatment plans with clear, upfront pricing and no hidden fees.
- ****No stop signal.**** Any good dentist working with anxious patients will establish a way for you to pause treatment at any time. If this is not discussed, ask about it — and if the response is dismissive, consider it a warning sign.

A Practical Checklist for Your Search

Before booking your first appointment, use this checklist to evaluate potential practices:

- ■ Does the practice mention anxiety management or nervous patients on their website? - ■ Are sedation options (nitrous oxide, sleep dentistry, oral sedation) available? - ■ Can you speak to the dentist or practice coordinator before your first visit? - ■ Is the practice environment modern, calm, and welcoming? - ■ Are all clinicians AHPRA-registered and ADA members? - ■ Does the practice offer flexible scheduling, including Saturdays? - ■ Are multilingual clinicians available if needed? - ■ Does the practice provide written treatment plans with upfront costs? - ■ Are interest-free payment plans available to reduce financial stress? - ■ Can the practice accommodate emergency appointments on the same day?

Taking the First Step

The hardest part of managing dental anxiety is often making that first call. Many anxious patients find it helpful to start with a consultation rather than a treatment appointment — a chance to meet the dentist, see the practice, and discuss your concerns without any clinical pressure.

Core Dental's seven Melbourne locations — in Southbank, South Melbourne, Caroline Springs, Carrum Downs, Epping, Wyndham, and Berwick — all welcome new patients for initial consultations. With interest-free payment plans through Payright (from \$1,000 to \$20,000), HICAPS on-site for instant health fund claims, and clinicians who genuinely understand dental anxiety, the barriers to getting started are lower than you might think.

You deserve dental care that respects your pace and your feelings. The right dentist is out there — and finding them could be the most important step you take for your oral health.

****Ready to find a dentist who understands dental anxiety?**** Book online at coredental.com.au or call ****13 13 16**** to speak with a team member at your nearest Core Dental location.