

Comfortably Numb: How Dentists Are Easing Your Fears

By Tiffany Owens



Not long ago, during a particularly rigorous root canal, I was forced to endure back-to-back features of Sting and Annie Lennox live in concert (that's right, my *dentist's* favorites). To this day, I'm still not sure which experience was more agonizing. Another time, I overheard my dentist explaining to another patient that the two most common side effects of the procedure he was about to perform were "pain and suffering." Sure, these stories seem funnier now than when they happened, but both times, it took everything I had to stay in—and ever return to—the dentist's chair.

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Let's face it, the universal dread that precedes a dental visit has existed as long as the whining tooth drill and giant Novocain needle. Dentists realize that a visit to their office—sometimes even just for a simple cleaning—strikes fear into the hearts of many patients and are, therefore, making great efforts to improve the experience. "In the last 20 years, dentists have been focusing more and more on the needs of the patients attached to the teeth," says American Dental Association spokeswoman Dr. Kimberly Harms.

Harms confesses that, like many of her patients, she's "chicken" when it comes to getting her own teeth worked on. Consequently, she and her husband have incorporated various patient perks into their Minnesota dental practice over the last decade and were among the first to offer movie-watching via virtual-reality goggles, which is rapidly becoming standard practice in offices nationwide.

In fact, about half of the 427 dentists in a 2003 ADA survey said they currently offered headphones, neck rests, warm towels, drinks and snacks to patients. Another 5 percent were taking things even further with massages, facials, manicures and pedicures, a trend now coined as the "dental spa."

Dr. Lorin Berland, the self-proclaimed "founder of spa dentistry," says that this move toward making his patients feel more relaxed began in 1996 with the addition of a massage therapist to his staff. The whole therapeutic concept took off from there. "At first, they thought I was crazy," he says. "Now, many of those people that were making fun of me want to open beauty salons—with a dental practice on the side."

Today, in addition to their wide range of dental services, Berland's Dallas Dental Spa offers lunchtime microdermabrasion skin peels, aromatherapy, music headphones and movie goggles, complimentary chair massages and a massage therapist on hand to assist in treating the stress associated with dental procedures.