

Breaking Barriers

Addressing Dental Anxiety to improve oral health outcomes

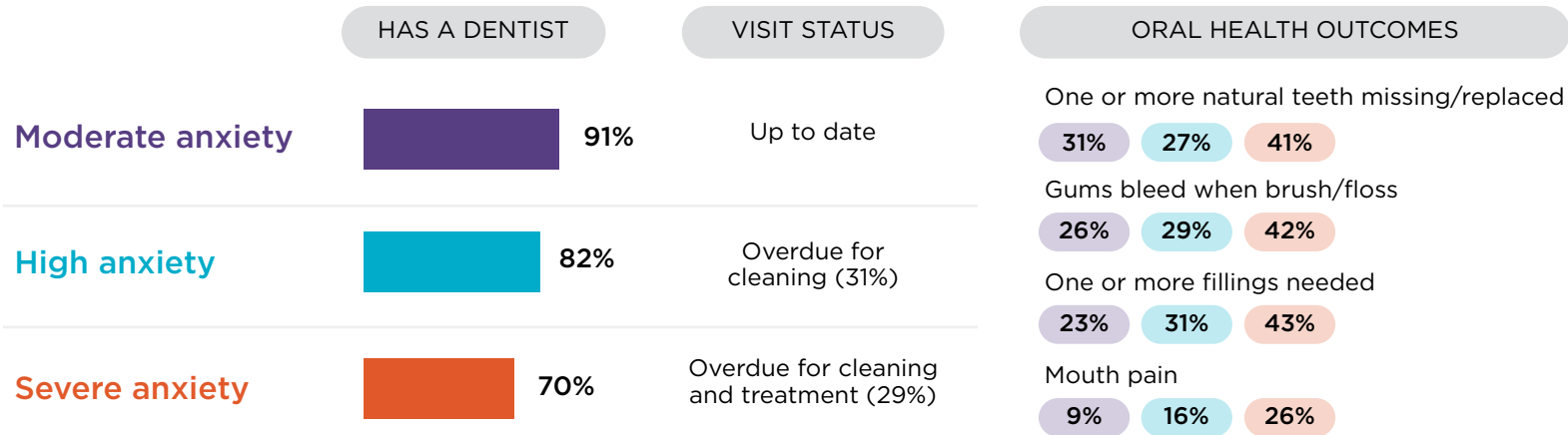
A Delta Dental primary research study conducted with consumers in 2023 revealed that Dental Anxiety is the second largest barrier to dental care. Delta Dental followed up with a study to better understand Dental Anxiety, which is characterized by an uneasiness about visits and treatment. While 9 in 10 adults believe oral health is integral to overall health, Dental Anxiety gets in the way of seeking care, highlighting a clear need to address this barrier.



54% of the US adult population experiences Dental Anxiety

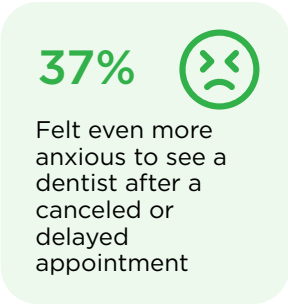
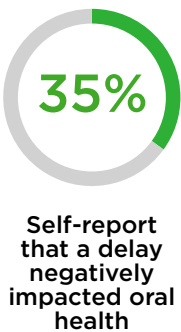
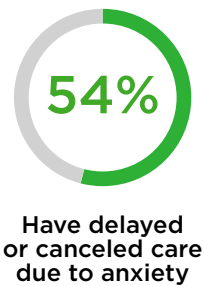
This translates to about 139MM people that suffer from Dental Anxiety nationally.

Dental Anxiety can be moderate, high, or severe. As anxiety severity increases, dental visits and treatments are avoided, leading to greater patient discomfort and worse oral health outcomes.



A roadblock to oral health

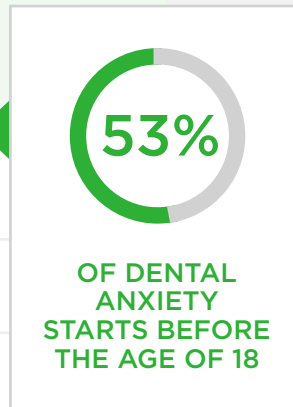
As dental problems get worse, the fear of going back grows, creating a cycle where delaying care fuels even more anxiety as treatments become more complex and costly.



The roots of Dental Anxiety

Dental Anxiety is often caused by past negative experiences

When Dental Anxiety begins before the age of 18, it is typically from specific negative experiences or needing extensive treatment during childhood.



Painful or uncomfortable procedure

51%

A bad experience with the dentist

38%

Needed significant amount of work as a child/teen

32%



For those with adult onset, Dental Anxiety often develops after a painful procedure, gaps in care, or the financial burden of a previous visit.

Painful or uncomfortable procedure

40%

Not going to the dentist regularly when younger

28%

Had to pay a large or unexpected out of pocket cost

29%

Among those with Dental Anxiety, common concerns can be grouped into several themes, such as...



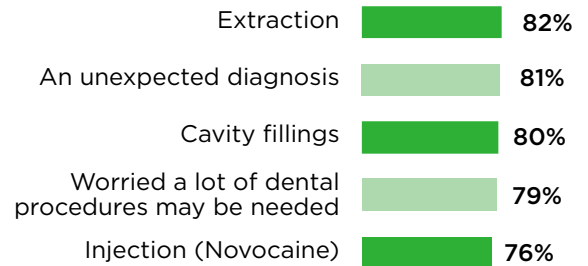
Top 5 specific fears



When it comes to specific procedures, an unexpected diagnosis is just as anxiety-inducing as an extraction or filling.

Among those with Dental Anxiety

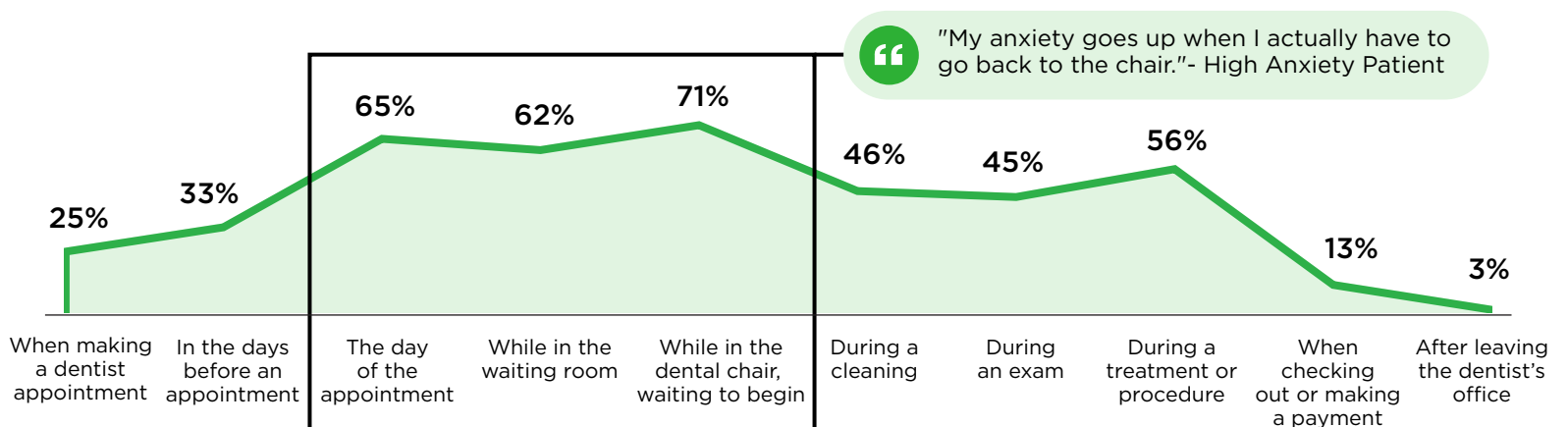
- Procedure-related concerns
- Concerns about the unexpected



The peak of anxiety:

The anticipation triggers more anxiety than the actual procedure

Patients are most anxious in the days, hours and minutes before the appointment, peaking while seated in the chair waiting to begin. There is an opportunity to intervene and help calm patient nerves in the time leading up to an appointment.

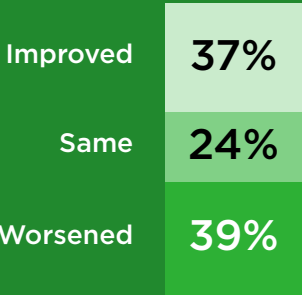


Even with little intervention, over one-third of those with Dental Anxiety have seen it improve over time.

Improvement is not limited to milder cases of anxiety.

How Dental Anxiety has changed over time

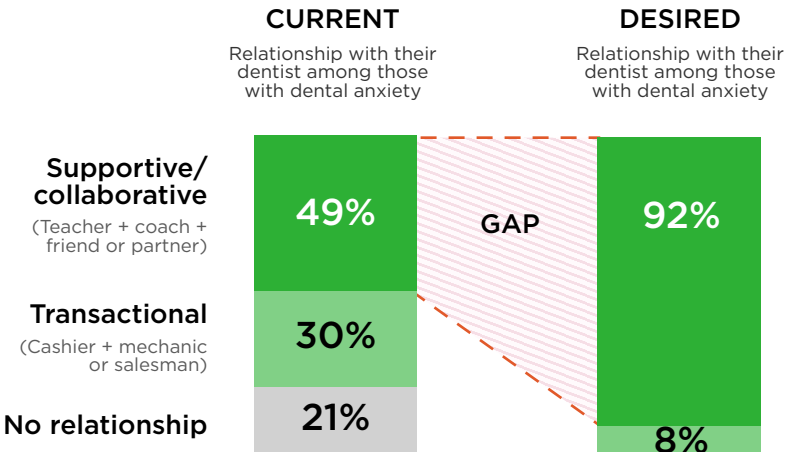
Among those with Dental Anxiety



“I’ve calmed down enough to know that nothing bad is going to happen from my dental appointment. The last few times have been much calmer. They go in, they do it and then I’m done.”
- Severe Anxiety Patient



Many anxious dental patients feel a lack of connection to their dentist and want the care experience to feel more collaborative.

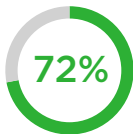


67%
of patients with Dental Anxiety have lost trust in a dental provider

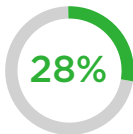
VS.

35%
of those without Dental Anxiety

Many patients struggle to voice their anxiety and would benefit from support in starting the conversation. 72% of patients with Dental Anxiety believe providers could do more to help them feel at ease.

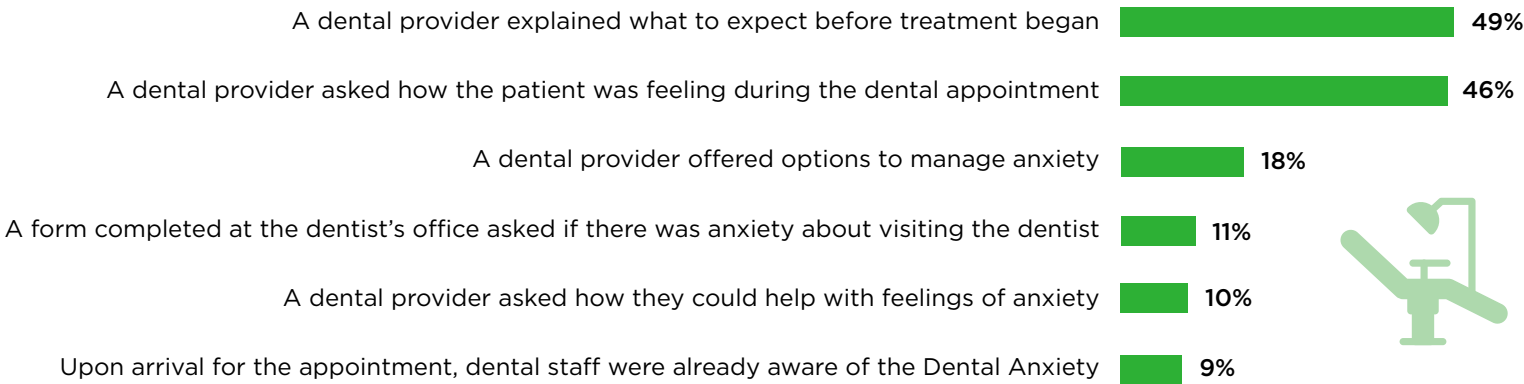


Many recognize that it’s their responsibility to communicate anxious feelings or concerns to their dental provider



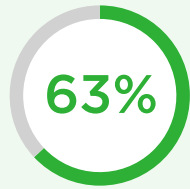
But very few have told the dental provider they feel anxious or uneasy

Dental Anxiety isn’t being addressed enough in the dental industry. Half of anxious patients aren’t asked how they’re feeling, and only 18% are offered ways to manage anxiety.



Finding solutions to Dental Anxiety

With greater awareness and education around Dental Anxiety, the dental industry can better uncover patient concerns and manage them proactively



of patients feel dentists should be more educated about Dental Anxiety



"Dental schools need to teach more ways to manage anxiety in patients." - Dentist



Patients are looking for a *VOICE*:



Validation

Acknowledge their anxiety.

68% of patients want a dentist who makes them feel at ease. 66% of patients also want a dentist who shows they care about their feelings.



Open communication

Reduce fear of the unknown.

78% value a dentist who clearly explains what to expect during treatment. 77% of patients also want a dentist who only recommends necessary treatments.



Involvement in decisions

Give a sense of control.

77% want to be involved in decisions about their oral care. 72% of patients also want to feel their choices are respected.



Comfort

Create a calming, supportive environment.

57% of patients feel more at ease with comfortable chairs and 56% value calming music at the office. 35% think soft, natural light is also something they look for in a dental office.



Empathy

Build a partnership based on trust.

77% want a dental office that has their best interest in mind. 51% of patients also want a personalized connection with their dentist.

There is ample opportunity to better support anxious dental patients to ease their fears and reduce the impact of Dental Anxiety on oral care.



Delta Dental commissioned Vital Findings, an independent market research agency, to conduct a multi-phase, mixed-methodology study to understand the prevalence of Dental Anxiety in the US population, its causes and triggers, and how the industry can support these patients.

The research included a quantitative online survey of 1,000 U.S. consumers (n=800 with Dental Anxiety and n=200 without Dental Anxiety) 18+ that have visited the dentist within the past 5 years. Dental Anxiety prevalence rates were determined using incoming sample; survey data was weighted to be representative of this prevalence as well as U.S. Census demographics. The sample was weighted to be representative of the U.S. Census and to reflect the proportions of consumers with and without Dental Anxiety. The margin of error for this survey is +/- 3.1 percentage points with a confidence level of 95 percent. Fieldwork took place between July 31 and Aug. 11, 2025.

This quantitative phase was informed by qualitative, in-depth interviews with n=8 patients classified as having moderate, high, or severe dental anxiety. Fieldwork for this phase took place between June 26 and July 2, 2025.

Qualitative research was then conducted with n=18 dentists and dental hygienists that have established methods for helping patients with Dental Anxiety to gather their perspective on challenges and opportunities to better serve those with Dental Anxiety. Interviews took place between Sept. 10 and Sept. 16, 2025.

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