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WHY PEOPLE DON’T GO TO THE DENTIST
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2016 PARTY IDEAS!
Two “F” words prevent one out of every three Americans from going to the dentist: Fear and Finances.

The Fear factor includes anxiety and phobia. Anxiety is fear of the known. People have an unpleasant memory of an experience, or were told scary stories by their friends or siblings, and obviously want no part of that. Phobia is fear of the unknown. People don’t know what to expect, but are certain they are not going to like it.

These two types of fears have allowed our ancestors to survive, per Gavin de Becker’s book, “The Gift of Fear.” This book, which everyone should read, explains that fear is a rational and healthy defense mechanism to survive in the world. So let’s address which fears make sense, and which do not when it comes to surviving in the world.

Tooth decay, gum disease, and infections in the mouth are real enemies that can severely damage your general health. It’s not only about losing your teeth. The bacteria in your mouth get into your bloodstream and flow to the rest of your body, where they can readily cause damage and harm to your organs and systems. Recent research is showing that inflammation in the mouth can greatly increase your chances of becoming diabetic, or suffering from other chronic diseases such as heart conditions and kidney disorders.

Going to the dentist is also important because the mouth is the mirror of the rest of the body. Many diseases in the body can be detected by looking at the mouth.

And, of course, there are diseases that act in the mouth, such as oral cancers. Even if you wear dentures, you should periodically visit the dentist to allow their early detection.

People who received orthopedic joint replacements, heart surgeries, cancer chemotherapy, radiation therapy, or organ transplants MUST maintain excellent oral health, or their medical procedures will fail.
We've established that NOT going to the dentist also has very scary consequences. Fortunately, these days there are easy ways to overcome a patient's fear of the dentist.

Mindful of people's anxieties, dentists offer many ways to get patients into their dental office, and to have them feel comfortable in the dental chair. Many dentists prescribe oral sedation such as Valium or Halcion pills or liquid. Most dentists offer laughing gas ("nitrous oxide analgesia"), which relaxes the patient and weakens memories of the procedure. Some dentists even offer choices such as behavior modification, desensitization therapy, hypnosis, or acupuncture to help overcome fears. Finally, some offices offer IV injections to keep patients relaxed.

For extreme cases of dental phobia or anxiety, sleep dentistry via general anesthesia is available at most hospitals and some offices. The patient – which in my practice

in Frederick often includes children – has the needed procedures done while they are totally asleep. The entire treatment plan, sometimes complex because the patient has neglected their mouth for years, is done in a couple of hours in the operating room. The patient wakes up and goes home with no unpleasant memories. Frederick Memorial Hospital is well set-up to accommodate dental patients.

Finances pose a different barrier regarding access to dental care. Frederick County has a number of helpful resources. These include the Maryland State Dental Association's Donated Dental Services program (www.mesda.com/md-foundation-for-handicapped.html), the Frederick County Health Department's clinic or Religious Coalition program (www.thereligiouscoalition.org/programs-services/healthcare-programs/), and Gray Area Access vouchers (health.frederickcountymd.gov/264/Dental-Clinic).
Frederick Memorial Hospital has developed a free/low fee clinic program that will open soon. The state hosts a Mission of Mercy free clinic in various locations several times a year (www.amissionofmercy.org/maryland-pennslyvania/clinic-location/).

Finally, many dental offices offer free dental care to children in cooperation with “Give Kids a Smile,” an ADA Foundation program (www.adafoundation.org/en/give-kids-a-smile). GKAS happens on the first Friday each February during Children’s Dental Health Month.

Access to dental care for those who cannot easily come to a dental office — such as those who are disabled or living in a nursing home, hospice or institution — is also available. Some dentists make home calls, and can perform limited treatment in the comfort of a patient’s private room or bed. They bring portable dental equipment with them, or drive a mobile van that the patient can enter for treatment.

Some dental offices are very experienced in treating patients in wheelchairs or gurneys, or patients who have special needs — those with Alzheimer’s Disease, autism, or mental challenges, for example.

For those who cannot make their own decisions, loved ones and caregivers need to know that resources and options are available. Whether the patient needs routine cleaning or extensive dental treatment, it can be performed in a setting that is conducive to the success of the treatment plan.

With the technology and services available today, there is no justification for anyone to forfeit, or to be denied, access to routine dental care. There is no barrier or obstacle that cannot be overcome. Everyone can, and should, receive needed dental care on a routine preventive basis.

The one thing far more expensive than dental care is neglect. Don’t be ashamed about the condition of your mouth; be proud that you’re overcoming the two “F words” and restoring your oral health while improving your general health.

The best “F word” to associate with dental care is “find it.” Find an affordable dentist who will treat you or your loved one, ask for procedures that will ease your fears, and find your way into their chair.

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