



Strategies for Coping with Distress Related to Medical and Dental Care

If you are a survivor of trauma, you may find that accessing medical or dental care is a very difficult experience. It may cause you to avoid care in general and it may prevent you from getting essential care you need.

If this is the case for you, you are not alone. It is very common for people to feel anxiety when accessing medical or dental care, especially when they have experienced trauma, such as physical or sexual assault. Some survivors experience flashbacks or overwhelming memories during medical or dental procedures and some describe feeling out of control, vulnerable, or unheard by providers.

While more and more providers are learning about trauma and are taking steps to better accommodate the needs of trauma survivors, this is not the norm. Unfortunately, much of the responsibility still falls on survivors to advocate for their safety and ask for what they need.

STRATEGIES FOR ACCESSING TRAUMA-INFORMED MEDICAL OR DENTAL CARE

1. Identify your options and seek referrals.

Depending on your community or financial resources, you may or may not have a lot of options when it comes to choosing a provider. If you do have options, take advantage of this and do your best to find a provider that is a good fit for you.

When selecting a provider, try to find those who are trauma-informed or trauma-competent. Trauma-informed and trauma-competent providers are providers who have been well-trained in the effects of trauma, have experience working with trauma survivors, have been trained on care strategies that can maximize choice and autonomy and avoid retraumatization, and who work in facilities that are designed with choice, autonomy, and emotional safety in mind.

A good way to identify trauma-informed and trauma-competent providers is to ask for referrals from individuals you trust. If you work with a therapist, advocate, or other professional, ask if they are familiar with trauma-informed providers in your community. If you are part of a support group or if you have friends or family members who are also trauma survivors, ask them if there is a provider in the community whom they trust.

2. Become familiar with a specific provider and facility before you receive services there.

When calling to make an appointment, ask the office if they are a trained, trauma-informed facility. If they do not know what “trauma-informed” means, they are most likely not trained. You could also ask if any of the providers have experience working with patients who have symptoms of post traumatic stress or severe anxiety. If they are not trained about trauma and if they do not have experience working with people who have trauma symptoms, this is a sign that they may not be a good provider for you. If you have no choice but to work with them you may have to take additional steps or have additional support in advocating for your needs.

In addition to asking about providers’ trauma-competency, you can also call ahead to ask for information about the facility and ask about any procedures that will be done. You can ask to tour the facility and meet providers ahead of time.

Prior to your appointment, you can talk to providers about your concerns and about any trauma symptoms you experience. You can also ask for accommodations, such as asking to wait for your appointment in a quiet area away from others, asking to wait outside until it is time to be seen, asking to have certain support people present during procedures, or asking for things such as music, comfort items, or weighted blankets.

3. Bring a support person(s)

Support persons can be important both for emotional support and as a second set of ears. If you are feeling stressed or anxious, it can be difficult to understand or retain information, such as when to take medications or when to call for follow-up care. You may also struggle to remember or identify questions you wanted to ask. Your support person can come prepared with a list of questions you identified in advance and they can write down any follow-up information you need to remember. The support person can also help you remember your coping plan and can encourage you to use it if they notice you are becoming distressed.

4. Emotionally prepare for the appointment

Coping with medical or dental anxiety isn’t limited to your time in the office. Prior to an appointment, or while waiting for a procedure, emotionally prepare yourself by meditating on positive affirmations related to your concerns. For example, if you feel out of control or vulnerable, it can be helpful to repeat to yourself, “I am the keeper of my own health.” If you worry about a scary diagnosis or doubt your ability to cope with distress during a

procedure, you might repeat to yourself, “I have the support and strength I need to cope.”

Pairing self-affirmations such as these with relaxation and visualization strategies is a great way to prepare yourself for a difficult experience. Practicing these in advance can help you come into the experience more relaxed, grounded, confident, and clear-headed; this, in turn, will make it easier to identify and use your coping strategies and to advocate for what you need.

5. Prepare to talk to your Provider.

A medical or dental provider may not have the full understanding of what ‘trauma-informed care’ is. As a result you may want to prepare to ‘train’ your provider in what you will need to have a safe and comfortable appointment.

- Be prepared to share what triggers you and ask for what you need to help avoid or work through those feelings.
- Share with your provider the following resources to help start a conversation with your provider on what you need:
 - *Trauma Notification Card for Medical and Dental Professionals;*
 - *Trauma Informed Dental Care;* and/or
 - *Trauma- Informed Practices for Trauma Survivors who are seeking Medical and Dental Care*

All are available on the Healing and Hope website.

6. Familiarize yourself with grounding strategies and make a coping plan.

A final strategy for coping with distress related to medical and dental care is to utilize mindfulness exercises, relaxation strategies, affirmations, or other grounding techniques *during* an appointment or procedure. If you are not familiar with mindfulness, relaxation, or other grounding techniques, there are resources and exercises available on the Healing and Hope website, including the video, *Exercises for Coping with Distress Related to Medical and Dental Care*.

In addition to the strategies identified here, the handouts *Trauma Competent Medical Care Preparation*, available on the Healing and Hope website, contains a list of things you can do to seek out trauma-informed medical or dental care, advocate for yourself with care providers, and manage trauma symptoms during an appointment or procedure.

Developed in collaboration with Abra Poindexter, LICSW, LIMHP - Psychotherapist

References:

- Donachie, L. (2018). Preparing and advocating for medical care as a trauma survivor. [Blog]. PACEs Connection. Retrieved on 12 August 2021 from: <https://www.pacesconnection.com/blog/preparing-and-advocating-for-medical-care-as-a-trauma-survivor>.



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