

Stress, the Nervous System & Your Dental Experience

How your body's stress response can influence your comfort at the dentist — and what can help.

YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

Always Listening

Your nervous system is constantly monitoring your environment for signs of safety or threat. It influences how you think, feel, and respond — including your experience in the dental chair.



When you feel safe, your nervous system shifts into a state of rest and restoration. When it perceives a threat, it activates a stress response — even if the “threat” is just a dental appointment.

Your body doesn't just respond to what's happening — it responds to what it *thinks* is happening.

SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM FIGHT, FLIGHT OR FREEZE

The sympathetic nervous system (SNS) prepares you to respond to perceived danger. It's a protective and necessary response, but when activated at the dentist, it can make the experience feel more difficult.

-  Faster heart rate
-  Shallower breathing
-  Increased muscle tension (jaw clenching, tight shoulders)
-  Heightened awareness and vigilance
-  Changes in digestion (nausea, upset stomach)
-  Feeling anxious, on edge or overwhelmed

YOUR
NERVOUS SYSTEM
CONTINUALLY
SHIFTS BETWEEN
THESE STATES.

PARASYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM REST, DIGEST AND HEAL

The parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) helps you return to a state of calm. It supports relaxation, digestion, healing and overall balance. Activating this state can make your dental experience feel safer and more comfortable.

-  Slower heart rate
-  Deeper, calmer breathing
-  Relaxed muscles (including the jaw)
-  Greater sense of safety and ease
-  Improved digestion
-  Better recovery and healing

HOW STRESS CAN SHOW UP AT THE DENTIST

-  Dental anxiety or fear
-  Jaw tension or clenching
-  Racing heart or feeling on edge
-  Nausea or upset stomach
-  Feeling sensitive to sounds or sensations
-  Needing more time to feel comfortable

These are real, valid responses — not a sign that something is “wrong” with you.

Your nervous system is doing exactly what it was designed to do: keep you safe.

WAYS TO HELP ACTIVATE A CALMER STATE

There are many simple tools that can support your nervous system before and during your appointment.

-  Slow, deep breathing
-  Exposure to natural light
-  Calming music or headphones
-  Closed eyes and visualization
-  Grounding techniques
-  A supportive, understanding team
-  Open communication about your needs

Even small shifts toward a calmer state can make a big difference in how your body experiences dental care.

A CALMER NERVOUS SYSTEM

A more comfortable dental experience is possible.

When we understand how the nervous system works, we can create a dental experience that feels safer, more supportive, and more aligned with your needs. Because when your body feels safe, everything changes.