

BCDHA Toolkit Outline

Starting on the right foot

Initiating the patient's experience with the first contact at the dental clinic is pivotal, and the reception team plays a crucial role in establishing a positive foundation for this new relationship. To enhance this process, offering new patients the opportunity to receive their intake forms beforehand is recommended. This proactive measure allows patients to complete the necessary paperwork before their initial appointment, freeing their attention to absorb the new environment upon arrival. Reducing wait times in the waiting room is equally beneficial, contributing to a more positive experience and minimizing the potential for heightened anxiety. Additionally, ensuring a timely transition into the operatory further contributes to a seamless and efficient patient journey.

As the frontline, the reception team serves as the primary point of entry. Adopting best practices, it is highly beneficial for the team to extend a warm greeting to patients upon their arrival. In instances where team members are engaged on the phone, even a simple visual acknowledgment can go a long way in making patients feel seen and contribute to their overall sense of reassurance and well-being.

As an oral health professional, your role is integral to shaping the overall patient experience. Creating an environment where patients feel acknowledged and cared for right from their first contact is essential. Building a strong patient-provider relationship is crucial at every stage of their time in the clinic. Initiating a warm greeting in the waiting room and engaging in casual conversation as you walk together to the examination room are key components of establishing this connection. These interactions lay the foundation for effective communication throughout the appointment.

Extend this practice beyond your booked patients to anyone in the clinic. A friendly greeting fosters a welcoming atmosphere, contributing to a more relational environment and helping individuals feel seen and at ease. This gesture sets a positive tone even if they are not initially scheduled with you. If the individual becomes your patient in the future, you've already initiated a positive relationship, setting the stage for a successful appointment for both the patient and you.

What is trauma?

Trauma is the physiological response triggered by events perceived as life-threatening and overwhelming. It's crucial to understand that the nervous system operates on an all-or-nothing basis, meaning the perceived threat doesn't necessarily have to be life-threatening—it only needs to be perceived as such. Trauma occurs when the nervous system doesn't have the opportunity to orient and respond appropriately to this perceived threat, whether internal or external.

It's essential to recognize that trauma is a universal experience—it resides in the nervous system and affects us all. Importantly, trauma is cumulative, with its impacts accumulating within the nervous system over time. This cumulative effect contributes to a profound experience of loss of autonomy and a diminished sense of agency.

Categorizing trauma into four distinct types can offer a comprehensive understanding of its various forms. These categories include impact trauma, medical and dental trauma, relational trauma, and other trauma.

1. **Impact Trauma:**

- This category encompasses events such as falls or motor vehicle accidents. These incidents involve a physical force that directly impacts an individual, potentially causing injury or harm.

2. **Medical and Dental Trauma:**

- Medical trauma refers to any procedure that is perceived as overwhelming by the patient. For instance, the experience of general anesthesia is considered traumatic, as it involves entering a state of near-death. Dental procedures, especially those inducing anxiety or fear, can also fall under this category.

3. **Relational Trauma:**

- Relational trauma is a widely recognized form of trauma that involves disruptions in relationships. An example is the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which are traumatic events occurring in childhood and significantly affecting the individual's well-being.

4. **Other Trauma:**

- This category encompasses diverse events such as near drowning or being electrocuted. These incidents may not fit neatly into the previous three categories but are equally impactful traumatic experiences.

Understanding these four distinct categories provides a framework for comprehending the various facets of trauma, each with its unique characteristics and consequences.

Dr. Stephen W. Porges, a distinguished figure from the National Institute of Health and the National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine, has made groundbreaking contributions to the field through the development of the Polyvagal Theory. Widely embraced in the realms of Psychology and Clinical Counseling, this theory serves as a pivotal tool in unraveling the intricacies of the nervous system's response to traumatic events and their enduring impact.

The Polyvagal Theory simplifies the understanding of the autonomous nervous system by delineating it into three distinct states: social engagement, fight/flight response, and freeze response. In terms of its physiological components, these states correspond to the ventral vagal, sympathetic arousal, and dorsal vagal systems.

The ventral vagal system plays a crucial role in facilitating social engagement without triggering the fight or flight response. Ideally developing in the first year of life through interactions with primary caregivers, this system becomes inhibited in cases of trauma. Subsequently, the survival systems of sympathetic arousal or dorsal vagal take precedence.

The sympathetic system activates the well-known fight or flight response, preparing the body for rapid action. Conversely, if there's a perceived inability to overcome the threat, the dorsal vagal system intervenes, inducing the freeze response—an instinctive reaction akin to feigning death.

Dr. Porges' Polyvagal Theory not only deepens our comprehension of these autonomic responses but also sheds light on how trauma disrupts the natural progression of the ventral vagal system, offering invaluable insights into the lasting consequences of traumatic experiences.

Understanding the intricacies of the brain can be simplified into three primary components: the rational thinking brain, the emotional brain, and the survival brain. In a state of social engagement, our nervous system grants us access to the entire spectrum of these cognitive functions. However, during survival

modes like the fight/flight response or freeze response, our connection to the rational thinking brain diminishes, leaving us to navigate the situation with the more primal aspects of our brain. Metaphorically, envision the nervous system as a container holding the residues of unresolved trauma. Everyone carries a unique container, varying in the extent to which it is filled with experiences. For some, the container holds minimal experiences, resulting in a perception of the world as a safe and comfortable place. In contrast, others bear a container brimming with numerous experiences, leaving little room within. Consequently, their nervous system tends to shift more readily into the flight/flight or freeze response.

This metaphorical approach offers a tangible way to grasp how the accumulation of life experiences influences our responses to stressors. By acknowledging the diversity in the contents of these metaphorical containers, we gain insights into why some individuals may more easily enter survival modes and how the level of trauma stored plays a significant role in shaping our neural responses.

Illustrating how any dental experience can potentially register as traumatic for an individual with a full trauma container offers valuable insight into the nuanced workings of the nervous system. From the standpoint of the rational brain, lying in the treatment chair beside the Oral Health Professional (OHP) seems like a routine dental appointment. There's an awareness that dental tools will be utilized for necessary procedures, and the conscious decision to be there underscores the understanding of its health benefits. However, when the trauma container triggers a shift into survival mode, this seemingly routine scenario transforms into a situation of heightened vulnerability. In this altered state, the patient finds themselves in a position where protection and self-defense become challenging, especially next to a relative stranger inserting tools into their mouth. Importantly, this survival experience is often subconsciously registered by the patient.

The physical act of lying down in a supine position further amplifies vulnerability, making self-defense difficult. Additionally, the placement of objects in the mouth, without the ability to close it for protection, contradicts the natural instincts associated with survival responses.

Adding another layer to this complex dynamic is the impact of past trauma, particularly impact trauma or relational trauma, which may have led to boundary ruptures. A boundary rupture, in essence, disrupts the neuroception, signaling a space as unsafe for the nervous system. Complicating matters, OHPs often need to operate near these boundary rupture areas to perform their work effectively. This proximity intensifies the challenge for the patient to maintain a regulated state during dental procedures.

Recognizing these intricacies sheds light on the multifaceted nature of the patient's experience and underscores the importance of trauma-informed approaches in dental care to create a more supportive and regulated environment for individuals with varying trauma histories.

Informed Practice

Implementing trauma-informed practices in dental care not only enhances the patient experience but also contributes to a more compassionate and patient-centered approach. Recognizing that everyone has encountered some form of trauma in their life underscores the importance of providing care that is informed by trauma awareness.

The essence of trauma-informed care lies in acknowledging patients as whole individuals, with unique life experiences that shape their reactions and interactions with the world. It requires understanding that a person's actions may deviate from perceived norms, prompting a curiosity about how best to support them in a dental setting.

Creating a clinic that grasps the fundamentals of trauma and adapts its practices accordingly can significantly improve the patient's experience. Here are some practical steps:

1. **Calm and Soothing Environment:**
 - Utilize elements like music or TV shows to create a relaxed atmosphere.
2. **Initial Appointment and Intake:**
 - Dental assistant staff inquire about anxiety levels during the initial appointment, making notes for the Dental Professional.
 - Ask patients about any pertinent details regarding their dental history.
 - Flag previous dental trauma in the patient's file.
3. **Patient-Centered Conversations:**
 - OHPs engage patients in conversations about their anxiety levels and preferences for support.
 - Inquire about factors that would make the appointment more comfortable for the patient.
4. **Communication and Flexibility:**
 - Communicate changes in Dental Professionals ahead of time, offering to rebook without a cancellation fee.
 - Before oral procedures, have a conversation with the patient, presenting a summary of the treatment plan.
 - Be flexible with the pace of the procedure, allowing time for questions and adapting the treatment plan if necessary.
5. **Non-Verbal Communication and Comfort Measures:**
 - Establish a non-verbal communication code with the patient.
 - Offer a pillow for patients who may be anxious in the supine position.
 - Provide the option of a mirror to enhance visibility during procedures.
6. **Responsive to Patient Signals:**
 - Pay attention to non-verbal cues indicating anxiety and allow time for breaks.
 - Indicate special patient requirements on their chart for easy visibility by other practitioners.

Remember, fostering a sense of control and agency for the patient significantly contributes to a safer and more positive overall dental experience. By incorporating these trauma-informed practices, dental care becomes not just a service but a thoughtful and supportive partnership between the patient and the healthcare team.

Understanding the health effects of trauma

There is a great deal of correlation between experiencing traumatic events and using coping strategies to cope with hypervigilance and being overwhelmed that can have a long-term negative impact on a person's physical and mental health (e.g., smoking, substance use, overeating, and high-risk sexual

behaviour). It is important to engage with patients in a collaborative, non-judgmental fashion when discussing their habits and how it might be impacting their dental hygiene. It is important to remember that when a patient comes for dental care, you are unaware of the person's situation and the degree of awareness or shame they experience in regards to the state of their teeth how, and they are coping with life stressors.

Understanding your own history and reactions

Recognizing the impact of a fuller trauma container is crucial, as individuals carrying such a burden often perceive the world as overwhelming and potentially threatening. In navigating our interactions, it becomes imperative to be cognizant of the experiences housed in our own trauma containers. This self-awareness equips us to identify potential triggers—situations, behaviors, or emotions—and enhances our ability to navigate various scenarios, a skill especially valuable in patient care.

This heightened awareness proves essential when working with patients, particularly those grappling with extreme anxiety. For instance, if a patient's sudden anger during a procedure triggers a personal memory, it may create discomfort and challenge our focus on the task at hand. Understanding our triggers and acknowledging our reactions enables self-care, allowing a clear distinction between the present situation and past experiences. This, in turn, fosters a heightened awareness not only of our own emotional landscape but also of the patient's.

Developing this level of self-awareness is a gradual process that may benefit from peer or professional support. Despite the time and effort required, the rewards extend beyond the professional realm into our personal lives.

In the context of patient care, the "Taking the Pulse" approach becomes invaluable. By proactively assessing each patient's unique needs and checking for flagged dental anxiety or trauma in their file, we pave the way for a more supportive and considerate approach. Engaging in open communication with the patient about how best to support them during procedures, without the need for explicit details about their experiences, contributes significantly to creating a positive and understanding patient experience. This proactive and compassionate approach underscores our commitment to patient-centered care and enhances the overall quality of their dental experience.

Dental Professional

As a Dental Professional, creating a supportive and positive experience for your patients involves various strategies that begin with your own self-regulation. Ensuring you are well-regulated, especially during busy workdays, is fundamental to providing effective support to your patients. Nonverbal cues about your own nervous system state can be picked up by others, influencing their own states. Taking a moment for the Body Sensation of Support/Easiest Breath exercise throughout the day, as outlined in the Tools section, can significantly contribute to both your well-being and that of your patients.

Building a strong patient-professional relationship is a cornerstone of enhancing the overall experience. For new patients, invest time in pre-treatment conversations outside the treatment chair. If possible, create a comfortable space with a regular chair in the treatment room, ensuring both you and the patient are seated during the conversation. Inquire about their dental history, discuss treatment plans, and collaboratively agree on nonverbal communication methods, especially when using the rubber tent. Investing this time with the patient substantially increases the likelihood of a positive experience, potentially influencing their decision to return for regular appointments.

Curiosity about the patient's overall dental experience without delving into details is crucial. Openly discuss any anxiety they may be feeling, normalizing their emotions. Offer a menu of options to make the appointment more tolerable and ask for their preferences. This approach increases the chances of

your patients being better regulated during the appointment, contributing to an overall positive experience.

Additionally, inquire about tools the patient may already use to manage anxiety, and if they lack such tools, take the time to teach them effective strategies. This not only helps with their anxiety but also creates more physical space in the mouth for your work.

Once this conversation is complete, invite the patient to sit in the treatment chair, ensuring they are ready before transitioning to a supine position. During oral treatment, keenly observe nonverbal cues from the patient's face and body language. Be flexible in adapting your pace, offering breaks as needed to ensure a comfortable and positive experience throughout the appointment. Your attentiveness to these details demonstrates a commitment to patient-centered care, fostering an environment where patients feel valued, understood, and well-supported.

Top of Form

Tools

Implementing various techniques can significantly contribute to creating a more relaxed and positive experience for patients during dental procedures. Here are several strategies:

- 1. Body Sensation of Support / Easiest Breath:**
 - Teach patients to pay attention to body sensations and the easiest breath. Practice with them by asking where their body feels supported by the chair and where their breath moves the easiest. This exercise can enhance their regulation and anxiety management throughout the appointment.
- 2. Pleasant Topic Imagery:**
 - Encourage patients to pick a pleasing topic to think about during the procedure. Topics like memorable trips, enjoyable hobbies, or moments with pets can be discussed in detail to distract and comfort the patient.
- 3. Imagining Biting into Something:**
 - Invite patients to imagine biting into something satisfying, helping manage the natural discomfort of foreign objects in the mouth. This simple visualization can be soothing.
- 4. Following Breath and Counting Breaths:**
 - Ask patients to identify a place where they can easily notice their breath. Encourage them to follow their breath or count breaths up to 10, providing a focal point for relaxation.
- 5. Counting Down From 100 By 7:**
 - Challenge patients to count down from 100 by 7, providing a cognitive distraction during the procedure.
- 6. Wiggling Toes:**
 - Invite patients to wiggle their toes and notice the details, promoting a grounded and mindful experience.
- 7. Stress Balls:**
 - Offer stress balls for patients to squeeze, providing a tactile outlet for stress.
- 8. Weight Blanket:**
 - If available, provide a weight blanket for added comfort. Ensure hygiene by using easily changeable covers.
- 9. Aromatherapy:**
 - Maintain a collection of calming essential oils and allow patients to choose one. A couple of drops on a tissue can create a soothing atmosphere.

10. Ear Buds with Music:

- Encourage patients to use their own earbuds to listen to music of their choice, creating a personalized and comforting auditory experience.

Integrating these techniques into your practice can significantly enhance the patient's comfort, making dental appointments a more positive and less stressful experience.

Top of Form

Working with Children

Establishing a thoughtful introduction protocol is paramount, especially when dealing with a child's first appointment. Consider initiating the process with an orientation appointment dedicated to building rapport, familiarizing them with the examination room, and introducing them to oral health tools. For an optimal experience, it's advisable to refrain from any actual dental work during this initial appointment, particularly if the child has never undergone such procedures or has had negative prior experiences. Instead, schedule a follow-up appointment for the next week. This approach allows the child ample time to absorb and integrate the information from the orientation session, significantly enhancing the likelihood of a positive and enduring experience.

Encourage the child to express any questions they might have about the upcoming appointment, fostering an open dialogue. Discuss how they can communicate the need to stop, introducing a simple non-verbal code, such as a thumbs-up for approval or raising the left hand if treatment needs to cease. Incorporate breaks into the session, providing the child with opportunities to close their mouth, breathe normally, and gauge their comfort level. Additionally, guide them in recognizing their own state and understanding what comes next in the process.

Keep the child informed about when they can move, offering a comforting distraction through an engaging television program. This thoughtful approach not only establishes a foundation of trust and communication but also sets the stage for a more relaxed and positive dental experience, laying the groundwork for a lifetime of better oral health encounters.

Working with Parents

Fostering a positive and supportive environment during dental appointments involves a mindful and considerate approach. Here are some strategies to enhance the experience for both parents and children:

1. **Express Curiosity and Offer Support:**
 - Begin by expressing genuine curiosity about the parent's anxiety, inviting them to share their experiences at the dentist and any concerns about their child's past experiences. Ask directly how you can best support them through the upcoming appointment.
2. **Empower Parents with Choices:**
 - Provide parents with choices on how they can support their child. Inquire about effective strategies for reducing both their own and their child's anxiety, acknowledging the importance of tailoring the experience to their preferences.
3. **Establish Connection:**
 - Work intentionally to connect with both the child, using their name, and check in with the parent. This fosters a sense of connection with the present moment, creating a more relaxed atmosphere.
4. **Transparent Communication:**
 - Clearly explain to both the parent and child what will happen during the appointment, inviting them to ask questions at any point in the process. Transparent communication helps alleviate uncertainties and builds trust.
5. **Adapt to Anxiety or Distress:**
 - If anxiety or distress increases in either the parent or child, be prepared to slow down or stop the process. Offer choices to both the parent and child, acknowledging their feelings. For example, if a child is in pain and the parent becomes anxious, pause to ask what would help the child and encourage slow, calming breaths.
6. **Consider Multiple Sessions:**
 - Assess the situation and ask if breaking up the appointment into multiple sessions would be beneficial. This flexible approach acknowledges the unique needs of each parent and child, ensuring a more comfortable and manageable experience.

By incorporating these strategies, you create an atmosphere of empathy, choice, and clear communication, contributing to a positive and supportive dental experience for both parents and their children.