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Anxiety May Enhance Pain during Dental Treatment

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to clarify the effects of anxiety about dental treatment on pain during treatment. Subjects consisted of 57 consenting sixth-grade students at Tokyo Dental College (male: 32, female: 25), all of whom participated in this study during their clinical training program. They knew how third molars were extracted and all had experience of assisting in tooth extraction. Prior to the study, trait anxiety in the subjects was evaluated according to the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI, Japanese version). The students were asked to read one of two scenarios describing a scene in which a third molar was extracted while imagining themselves to be the patient. Scene 1 is set in an “environment where the patient feels safe and comfortable,” and the Scene 2 is set in an “environment where the patient feels strong anxiety”. The subjects were asked to imagine the anxiety and pain in that scenario and evaluate that pain according to a visual analogue scale (VAS). Two scenarios were randomly shown to the subjects in a crossover manner. No significant correlation between trait anxiety and preoperative anxiety was observed. There was no difference in level of preoperative anxiety for Scene 1 and Scene 2 between the high- and low-trait anxiety groups. This suggests that there was no relationship between sensitivity to anxiety as a characteristic of the subject and amplitude of anxiety immediately prior to treatment. Scene 2 elicited significantly higher anxiety before injection of regional anesthesia, significantly higher pain during insertion of the needle, and significantly higher pain during extraction of the tooth than Scene 1. This difference suggests that patients feel stronger pain if anxiety in the treatment environment is high and that it is, therefore, important to reduce anxiety during treatment to reduce pain.

Key words: Anxiety — Pain — Dental treatment

Introduction

For most dental patients, dental treatment is “painful and scary”. Anxiety and tension about dental treatment may cause systemic complications. More than half of systemic complications develop during local anesthesia. Most complications are not critical, such as fainting or hyperventilation syndrome. However, patients sometimes die of acute heart failure or cerebrovascular accident. In general, anxiety and fear are said to enhance pain. According to one report discussing the relationship between amplitude of anxiety as a characteristic of a patient (trait anxiety) or amplitude of anxiety when secur-
ing a vein (state anxiety) and subjective strength of pain4, subjects with higher trait anxiety showed a stronger state anxiety and realized stronger pain when a vein was punctured and a catheter inserted than a subject with lower trait anxiety. This suggests that patients with a stronger anxiety trait tend to experience stronger anxiety during dental treatment than patients with a weaker anxiety trait and that they are likely to feel more pain. Another study reported that patients with stronger state anxiety experienced stronger pain when having veins punctured7. However, these studies do not directly discuss dental treatment. Therefore, it has yet to be determined whether anxiety about dental treatment affects pain during such treatment.

The purpose of this study was to clarify the effects of anxiety about dental treatment on pain during treatment. Subjects were asked to read two scenarios describing a scene in which a third molar was extracted. The relationship between anxiety and pain was discussed based on the VAS (Visual Analogue Scale) values of anxiety and pain obtained while the subjects were reading the scenarios.

Subjects and Method

Subjects consisted of 57 consenting sixth-grade students at Tokyo Dental College (male: 32, female: 25). The specific content of the study was not explained to them to prevent preoccupation from affecting the results. All subjects participated in this study during...
Anxiety Enhances Pain in Dental Patients

Table 1 Script (Scene 2)

The following is the text of a hypothetical dental care situation. Read the text and imagine that you are the patient. You will be asked about your condition several times during the process. Use the tool provided to record your condition each time.

Scene 2

Your third molar is to be extracted today. Your regular dentist referred you to an oral surgeon. An unfriendly dental hygienist calls you. You enter the clinic and see a lot of chairs and doctors. This unfamiliar sight takes you by surprise.

You see a young dentist in the clinic. The dentist asks you about your medical condition.

“I am going to numb the area. Let’s bring the chair down.”
You are not quite ready for it... But the procedure is about to begin.

“OK, Dr. ****, would you numb the area?”
My god! Is he going to do it?
The needle comes close to your face, and then it goes inside your mouth...

“No, not there.”
“Oh, I’m sorry.”
“It’s going to sting a little. Breathe slowly through your nose.”

Record 1: Record the degree of your anxiety regarding the tooth extraction.

“I am going to numb the area. Let’s bring the chair down.”
You are not quite ready for it... But the procedure is about to begin.

“OK, Dr. ****, would you numb the area?”
My god! Is he going to do it?
The needle comes close to your face, and then it goes inside your mouth...

“No, not there.”
“Oh, I’m sorry.”
“It’s going to sting a little. Breathe slowly through your nose.”

Record 2: Imagine and record the pain when needle with the local anesthetic is inserted.

The chair is brought down again. It appears that the procedure is about to begin.

“Oh, here we go.”
I wonder if the anesthetic is working. The dentist doesn’t ask at all.

What if I feel the pain? I wonder if I am supposed to put up with it a little...
The young dentist appears to be the one who will extract the tooth. Just as you thought, he doesn’t seem to be experienced with the procedure. He doesn’t work smoothly, and the experienced dentist sometimes takes over.

You hear the sound of the turbine. You unconsciously develop a painful expression on your face. However, the dentist doesn’t stop. He is only looking at the inside of your mouth. You constantly hear the instructions by the experienced dentist.

It feels as if it’s taking too long. You are tired from keeping your mouth open.
A creaking sound... Your chin feels more weight placed on it.
Hold on a little longer. You may feel a discomfort, but the tooth is almost out...

Record 3: You felt a slight pain at this time. Imagine and record the pain.

their clinical training program. They knew how a third molar was extracted and all had experience of assisting in tooth extraction.

Before the study, the trait anxiety of the subjects was evaluated according to the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI, Japanese version), which is a self-administered psychological test with no time restriction. The subjects were then asked to read one of two scenarios describing a scene in which a third molar was extracted while imagining themselves to be the patient. They were asked to imagine the anxiety and pain that scenario would elicit and evaluate that pain according to the visual analogue scale (VAS). They were next asked to read another scenario after an at least two-day interval and repeat the same evaluation in the same manner.

These scenarios consisted of a scene describing the extraction of a third molar. One is set in an "environment where the patient feels safe and comfortable," and the other is set in an "environment where the patient feels strong anxiety" (Table 1). The timing of the
evaluations were: (1) anxiety before injection of local anesthesia, (2) pain during insertion of a needle, and (3) pain during extraction of the tooth. In VAS evaluation, the left end of the scale (0 mm) indicates “no anxiety or pain,” and the right end (100 mm) indicates “strongest anxiety or pain imaginable”. Subjects were asked to evaluate the degree of their own anxiety and pain on the scale.

The data were expressed as an average value ± the standard deviation. The Spearman rank correlation and Wilcoxon signed-rank-sum test were used for statistical analyses. A significance level of p<0.05 was considered to be significant.

Fig. 1 Relationship between STAI values and preoperative anxiety for total subjects

![Fig. 1](image_url)

Fig. 2 Relationship between STAI values and preoperative anxiety for female subjects

![Fig. 2](image_url)

**Results**

1. **Relationship between STAI values and preoperative anxiety (VAS)**

There was no significant correlation between STAI values and preoperative anxiety (VAS) for any subject (Scene 1: rs = 0.18, Scene 2: rs = 0.10; Fig. 1); in female subjects (Scene 1: rs = 0.20, Scene 2: rs = 0.10; Fig. 2); and in male subjects (Scene 1: rs = 0.18, Scene 2: rs = 0.11; Fig. 3).

Values of STAI were divided into two groups including less than average (24–46, 38.8 ± 6.2) and more than average (47–74, 54.5 ± 6.8) and the preoperative anxiety levels of Scene 1 and Scene 2 were compared. There was no significant difference in Scene 1
When comparing Scene 1 and Scene 2, the anxiety of subjects before injection of local anesthesia was 40.4 ± 24.6 and 63.8 ± 22.2 for Scene 1 and Scene 2, respectively. The pain during insertion of the needle was 46.9 ± 30.2 and 76.5 ± 21.3 for Scene 1 and Scene 2, respectively. The pain during extraction of the tooth was 51.7 ± 23.2 and 69.5 ± 21.9 for Scene 1 and Scene 2, respectively. In all cases, Scene 2 showed significantly higher values than Scene 1 (Fig. 5).
In females, anxiety before injection of regional anesthesia was 39.0 ± 24.3 and 63.1 ± 21.6 for Scene 1 and Scene 2, respectively. The pain during insertion of the needle was 49.6 ± 31.7 and 76.1 ± 22.0 for Scene 1 and Scene 2, respectively. The pain during extraction of the tooth was 53.4 ± 25.8 and 71.5 ± 22.6 for Scene 1 and Scene 2, respectively. In all cases, Scene 2 showed significantly higher values than Scene 1 (Fig. 6).

In males, the anxiety before injection of regional anesthesia was 37.0 ± 23.8 and 58.4 ± 22.7 for Scene 1 and Scene 2, respectively. The pain during insertion of the needle was 38.5 ± 27.2 and 71.3 ± 21.9 for Scene 1 and Scene 2, respectively. The pain during extraction of the tooth was 45.7 ± 21.6 and 64.2 ± 21.2 for Scene 1 and Scene 2, respectively. In all cases, Scene 2 showed significantly higher values than Scene 1 (Fig. 7).

In all conditions, females showed higher values than males. However, there was no statistically significant difference.

**Discussion**

No significant correlation was found between trait anxiety and preoperative anxiety in this study. Furthermore, there was no difference in the preoperative anxiety of Scene 1 and Scene 2 between the high- and low-trait anxiety groups. This suggests that there was no relationship between sensitivity to anxiety as a characteristic of a patient and amplitude of anxiety immediately before treatment. Scene 2 elicited significantly higher anxiety before injection of the regional anesthesia, significantly higher pain during insertion of the needle, and significantly higher pain during extraction of the tooth than Scene 1. This suggests that subjects feel stronger pain if anxiety in therapeutic environment is high.

**1. Subjects**

The subjects consisted of sixth-grader dental students. It was assumed that they well understood the flow of tooth extraction, including local anesthesia, as they all had experience of clinical training. In addition, they all had
Anxiety Enhances Pain in Dental Patients

training in infiltration anesthesia and infra-
alveolar nerve block. Therefore, it was sup-
posed that they would be able to imagine the
pain that would occur during the insertion of
a needle based on their experience.

Less than half of the students (male: 15/32,
female: 11/25), however, had experienced a
third molar extraction. Therefore, it was diffi-
cult for most of the subjects to imagine the
pain and discomfort of tooth extraction based
on personal experiences. However, in this
study, lack of personal experience of tooth
extraction had only a small effect on the dif-
ference between Scene 1 and Scene 2, as each
subject evaluated both scenarios in a crossover
manner.

Since all the subjects in this study were
dental students, this specialized experimental
condition may have affected the results.
Further study should use subjects who are
not specialists in medicine or dentistry.

2. Method

In this study, anxiety and pain were evalu-
ated according to VAS, using two scenarios of
third molar extraction, including one with an
“environment where the patient feels strong
anxiety” and one with an “environment where
the patient feels safe and comfortable”.

The best way to evaluate anxiety and pain
during dental treatment is to evaluate patients
in the actual environment of tooth extraction.
However, it is ethically unacceptable to artifi-
cially create an environment where a patient
feels strong anxiety. Therefore, in this study,
we used a method where the subjects were
made to imagine anxiety and pain by using
scenarios.

There are several methods of evaluating
anxiety. Among them, STAI is the standard
method\(^9\). STAI can evaluate both trait anxi-
ety, which indicates strength of anxiety based
on the character of a subject, and state anx-
xiety, which indicates strength of anxiety within
a particular environment. However, it takes
15–20 minutes to fill in the STAI question-
naire. Therefore, it is difficult to evaluate state
anxiety by STAI while reading a scenario, as
was done in this study. Therefore, VAS was
used to evaluate state anxiety in this study. It
has been reported that there is a good corre-
lation between STAI and VAS when used to
evaluate state anxiety\(^9\).

3. Relationship between trait anxiety and
state anxiety of subjects before extrac-
tion of tooth

This study found no relationship between
trait anxiety in the subjects and state anxiety
before extraction of a tooth. In other words, a
person who hardly feels anxiety under normal
circumstances may feel strong anxiety if the
environment for treatment is bad and vice
versa.

According to one report discussing the
relationship between trait anxiety and state
anxiety when securing a subject’s vein\(^6\), sub-
jects with strong trait anxiety showed a greater
increase in state anxiety when puncturing a
vein and inserting a catheter than subjects
who did not have strong trait anxiety. How-
ever, in this study, there was no difference in
anxiety levels on entering the examination
room between the subjects.

Therefore, it is necessary to create a clinical
environment that does not promote patient
anxiety.

4. Relationship between state anxiety
before extraction of tooth and pain
during insertion of needle and extrac-
tion of tooth

The results of this study suggest that a
patient feels stronger pain if the state anxiety
is strong in the therapeutic environment, and
anxiety enhances pain irrespective of per-
sonal sensitivity to anxiety. Therefore, the
same as previous reports on the relationship
between state anxiety and pain when securing
a vein\(^15\), this study found that there was a
relationship between state anxiety and pain in
dental treatment. In a recent study\(^2\), expecta-
tion of decreased pain reduced subjective
experience of pain in healthy volunteers. Our
results agree with that finding. We believe,
therefore, that we may extrapolate our cur-
rent results to generalized subjects who are
not engaged in medical fields.
In this study, there was no difference in degree of anxiety before extraction of a tooth between female and male subjects. The same result was reported in a paper on preoperative state anxiety in patients with jaw deformities. Furthermore, it was supposed that there was no difference in the effect of state anxiety on pain between male and female subjects, as there was no difference in state anxiety and degree of pain during insertion of a needle and extraction of a tooth between male and female subjects. Therefore, these results suggest that it is important to establish a therapeutic environment that gives minimum anxiety to patients in order to reduce pain during treatment.

In conclusion, in this study, we discussed the effects of level of anxiety about dental treatment on pain during treatment. We found no relationship between trait anxiety in a subject and state anxiety before extraction of a tooth. In contrast, patients felt strong pain if state anxiety in the treatment environment was strong. As shown above, it is important to reduce anxiety during treatment to reduce pain during treatment.

References


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