

How two small electric ear clips helped me cure my fear of the dentist

SOME 70% of those visiting the dentist in Ireland will feel anxiety or nervousness to some degree. And Colette Brennan, 42, is one of those unlucky ones, suffering with an extreme form of dental anxiety that makes her physically sick. Then her dentist introduced her to a pioneering new micro-current treatment called the Alpha-Stim, she tells her story...



THE PATIENT

USUALLY my visits to the dentist have involved going under IV sedation — even for just one filling! Otherwise I would be physically sick and wouldn't be able to cope.

I also needed to have someone with me in the surgery as a distraction. I get very anxious before an appointment, near to tears, and as soon as I see the dentist the tears come down my cheeks and my anxiety reaches a peak. When they try and get me to open my mouth, they can look, but they're not allowed to touch.

My anxiety stems from a traumatic incident 13 years ago. I went for a tooth extraction and I bled really badly. That really scared me. The dentist was trying to take a tooth out and he let it fall in my mouth and it got lodged at the back of my throat. The dentist roared at me and I bit his finger by mistake. He sent me out with lots of dried blood around my mouth. I felt so anxious and embarrassed.

So I stopped going to the dentist altogether. Then after two years I had to have two root canals, four fillings and one extraction. My anxiety was a real problem.

So I talked to my new dentist, Grainne O'Rourke from Mullingar Dental Centre, who was very understanding. She introduced me to the Alpha-Stim — a tiny box that sends relaxing micro-currents via two ear clips.

After the dentist I feel calm — usually I would be trembling, perspiring a little and filled with fear waiting for the pain to kick in. Instead I feel a little vibration effect in my ears when the ear clips go on. It calms me, mentally, I am able to talk and even laugh with my dentist! I don't feel anything in my head, just the device on my ears. The level of the Alpha-Stim can be adjusted to

ME & MY OPERATION

MICROCURRENT THERAPY FOR DENTAL ANXIETY



suit the stage of the treatment. While in the chair I feel more relaxed and less anxious. As my treatment continues, I experience a faint tingling sensation, but that tends to disappear after a while.

I was never awake during the work before so it's a big achievement for me not to be sedated, which has also saved me money. After the treatment there's no sensation — no after-effects from using the device, although I do sleep well probably because I'm so relaxed.

THE DENTIST

Grainne O'Rourke from Mullingar Dental Centre
DENTAL anxiety affects up to 70% of the population. Symptoms include sweating, shaking, difficulty opening your mouth and sudden reactions. Many postpone treatment which means their need is greater because of the neglect. So it's a vicious circle.

Ideally, these patients need to have a pleasant experience and complete any required treatment.

This needs to be followed up with regular maintenance visits.

Anxious patients are more difficult to treat because they have a tense body and mouth. They will ask to have breaks during treatment which makes it difficult to carry out work.

The options to treat anxiety include using a computer-controlled delivery of the local anaesthetic, and 'show and tell', where the dentist talks the patient through the procedure and demonstrates what they are going to do. If this doesn't work, then sedation with nitrous oxide or IV sedation is offered, which does come with risks.

Some patients actually need treatment under general anaesthesia in a hospital setting. This carries even more risk and is very expensive.

I first became aware of the Alpha-Stim in December 2015. I met a US-based doctor who had been using it as an anti-anxiety aid. She said she was getting great results with it and had in some cases replaced sedation with the Alpha-Stim. I did my own research and discovered that

the product was approved by the American Food And Drug Administration as a medical device and had been used for almost 20 years.

I approached Alpha-Stim who provided training and we started using it in the surgery early this year.

We have had great success. It is non-invasive and very easy to use. We now often apply it in the waiting room and we can visibly see patients relax. Patients are now asking for it — it's an invaluable tool.

The Alpha-Stim AID uses a form of cranial electrotherapy stimulation (CES) to stimulate cells in the brain which trigger a reaction to produce the feel-good chemical serotonin.

It activates particular groups of nerve cells located at the brainstem and appears to amplify activity in some neurological systems, while diminishing activity in others.

This neurological 'fine tuning' is called modulation, and occurs either as a result of, or together with, the production of a certain type of electrical activity pattern in the brain known as an alpha state which can be measured on brainwave recordings.

This is accompanied by feelings of calmness and relaxation, and appears to decrease levels of stress, agitation and stabilise the patient's mood.

THE PROCEDURE

THE treatment involves cranial electrical stimulation delivered via transcutaneous ear clip electrodes, moistened with a conducting solution. They are applied for 20 minutes to an hour or more on an initial daily basis for a week or two. The microcurrents transmitted are imperceptible.

Last week, the NHS in Britain began conducting a study on the Alpha-Stim AID and how it helps with patients suffering from anxiety, while a recent study in Nigeria showed it can 'significantly' reduce anxiety.

■ CONTACT Mullingar Dental Centre at mullingardental.ie for more details. Irish Daily Mail readers will receive a discount of around €100 at alpha-stim.co.uk when purchasing the Alpha-Stim AID (this costs approximately €500 inc. VAT), to avail of the offer quote the code IDM100 when ordering

Under the microscope



Celebrity cook Lorraine Pascale, 43, answers our health quiz

CAN YOU RUN UP THE STAIRS?

YES. I go to the gym four times a week so I'm pretty fit. I do a lot of weights. I can't stand yoga, but I don't mind Pilates.

GET YOUR FIVE A DAY?

ABSOLUTELY. Every morning I have a protein shake with matcha green tea, spinach, parsley, maca powder (a root vegetable powder), spirulina (an edible algae) and berries, along with poached eggs. I love kale, watercress and haddock. A favourite snack is Thai fishcakes.

ANY VICES?

BLUE cheese; the stinkier the better!

EVER DIETED?

WHEN I eat a lot of cake for work and don't go to the gym as frequently, I can put on as much as a stone (I'm 5ft 11in and weigh around 10st 7lb). When my clothes start to pinch in the wrong places, I know I have weight to shift and I eat more protein and colourful veggies and wholemeal, as opposed to white carbs.

WORST ILLNESS OR INJURY?

I HAD surgery on my feet as a child to readjust bones that were painful when I walked. I had pronation issues (when the feet roll in). During the operation they didn't give me enough anaesthetic so I woke up in the middle of surgery. All I remember seeing is the surgeon using what looked like a toy chainsaw and me yelling: 'What are you doing?' I wasn't in pain, but it was scary.

ANY FAMILY AILMENTS?

[LORRAINE was adopted] I know there's a history of cancer, but cancer is a lottery. You can be super healthy and get it, and other people who are riddled with it still smoke and recover.

TRIED ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES?

I'VE TRIED them all, including acupuncture when I had chronic shoulder pain a few years ago. My doctor said I'd need surgery and acupuncture was my last chance to avoid it and it worked.



EVER BEEN DEPRESSED?

I CONSIDER myself a positive person, but I had post-natal depression after my daughter, Ella [now 19] was born and I've had periods of generalised anxiety disorder with panic attacks, social anxiety and high levels of stress throughout my life, partly due to my unsettled childhood [Lorraine was fostered at eight when her adoptive parents split up before being reunited with her adoptive mother a year later]. I practise meditation. That's helped me build resilience. I've spoken till I'm blue in the face with amazing therapists, but eventually you need to work through it yourself.

HANGOVER CURE?

NO CURE works when you're over 40. I like rose in the summer or a mojito cocktail (made with rum, mint, soda water and sugar), but I rarely drink.

SLEEP WELL?

I'VE NEVER been a good sleeper. I go to bed around 10pm, but always wake up between 4am and 5am. I think I'm one of those people who doesn't need a lot of sleep.

BIGGEST PHOBIA?

SNAKES! It only started recently and I'm not sure why.

LIKE TO LIVE FOR EVER?

I DON'T know about that. My goal is to live as fully as possible. When my time comes, it comes.

Interview by SARAH EWING