For some people the thought of going to the dentist is terrifying. **Kelly Cook** finds out how the dental health psychology service at Guy's Hospital is helping people conquer their fear.



Dr Jennifer Hare and Professor Tim Newton

Facing your fears



When **Michael Hillard** was two years old a bad experience at the dentist left him with a life-long phobia of needles and the dentist.

Extreme anxiety and panic attacks meant he avoided check-ups for over 10 years, but a broken tooth finally forced him to confront his fear.

Michael, 32 from South Kensington in London, visited the dental psychology service at Guy's Hospital, which receives more than 400 referrals every year for dental phobia, chronic pain and other dental issues affecting someone's psychological well-being.

With the support of a psychologist, Michael had cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), a talking therapy that helped to manage his fear by changing his thoughts and behaviours.

Michael said: "It wasn't easy and took time, but I knew I had to do it for my health. I now go for regular six-month check-ups and I've had a couple of fillings and dental work, something I would have avoided in the past.

> One in 10 adults in the UK experience an extreme fear of the dentist

"I'm still not a fan of the dentist and I'll have to continue working on my phobia, but I know I can do it and I've learnt ways to cope. It's something I'm quite proud of."

Around one in 10 adults in the UK experience an extreme fear of the dentist.

Dr Jennifer Hare, lead health psychologist in dental services, said: "There are a variety of reasons why people are fearful – it could be the sound of the drill or the thought of a needle going into their mouth.

"We see people who have not been to the dentist in decades. But avoiding the dentist can result in worsening dental problems and the need for more complex treatment, which can escalate the underlying problem of anxiety."

Dr Hare added: "Some patients become so self-conscious or embarrassed about their teeth that it affects their personal and professional lives so it's really important that we help them change the way they feel about visiting the dentist."

Over a period of between six to 10 weeks, psychologists help prepare patients by explaining every step of the treatment and gradually introducing them to the dental clinic environment.



Researchers are exploring the use of virtual reality technology

Fast facts

- **93%** of patients who used the dental psychology service have been able to undergo treatment without sedation
- Guy's Hospital is home to the largest dental school in Europe and trains 20% of all qualifying dentists in England



Eileen Byrne, 65 from Coventry, avoided going to the dentist for three years after a traumatic experience.

The retired personal assistant said: "I was always really nervous, so much so that I didn't sit in the waiting room. I used to wait outside until they called me in.

"The sessions at Guy's Hospital helped me to think about positive things and gave me the confidence to sign up with a dentist closer to home."

Professor Tim Newton, a consultant health psychologist, who established the service 10 years ago, said: "People with a dental phobia are most commonly given sedation to allow them to become relaxed enough to have their dental treatment performed.

"However this does not help them to overcome their fear in the long term. The goal of our service is to enable patients to receive dental treatment without the need for sedation."

> "We see people who have not been to the dentist in decades."

Researchers from Guy's and St Thomas' and King's College London are now exploring whether virtual reality technology could help treat people with dental phobia.

Patients successfully treated with traditional CBT at Guy's Hospital have helped develop the study, which involves wearing a virtual reality headset to simulate the dental clinic environment.

Dr Hare said: "Virtual reality is already used to help people with a fear of flying or heights and so far feedback for dental phobia is encouraging."

The team also support people with learning difficulties and patients who are living with chronic facial pain, jaw pain and burning mouth syndrome – a painful, complex condition that can cause a burning or tingling feeling in the mouth.

Dr Hare said: "Sometimes there is no diagnosis or cure for patients with chronic pain so they end up putting their lives on hold. Our aim is to help them come to terms with their condition so they can enjoy a better quality of life."