

Weighted blankets in dentistry: Making patients' comfort a priority

Weighted blankets are more than the latest must-have item when it comes to calming anxious patients, especially children.

[Amber Metro-Sanchez, BA, RDH](#)

Weighted blankets seem to be everywhere in retail, and they have been touted as the latest must-have item. They claim to provide a calming embrace that helps relieve the stress and anxiety that seems to be ever-present in our hectic day-to-day lives. This makes a weighted blanket a tempting purchase for most consumers, and perhaps you have tried out this product for yourself.

As a dental professional, I was extremely curious to see if a weighted blanket could possibly help my patients. I was especially seeking a simple solution for those individuals whose anxiety skyrockets as soon as they cross my path. Honestly, I like to make my job as enjoyable as possible, and seeing a tear-filled child in my chair always distresses me. I was hoping that this product was more than just hype and that it could resolve this dental dilemma. So, I set out to test weighted blankets in my dental office to see if they could really be the anxiety reliever I was looking for.

The basics of weighted blankets

Weighted blankets tend to weigh between five and 30 pounds. The pressure that your body receives from this covering imitates a therapeutic technique called deep pressure stimulation.¹ As explained by [AppliedBehaviorAnalysisEdu.org](#), deep pressure stimulation is firm but gentle squeezing, hugging, or holding that relaxes the nervous system.² This pressure can be received from another person's hands, specialized massage equipment, or weighted products that a person can wear or wrap around themselves to provide pressure.

Deep pressure stimulation helps the body move from a fight-or-flight response found in the sympathetic nervous system to a rest-and-digest state that characterizes the parasympathetic nervous system. With this transition, the body lets go of stress and anxiety and moves to a more relaxed sense of calm and peace.

Not all weighted blankets are the same

With weighted blankets, a common misconception is that all products are created equal. But unfortunately, most weighted blankets sold in the large retail outlets are cheaply made and do not function as intended. Many of the beads end up at the sides and ends of the blanket instead of over the person, so the product does not produce the required deep pressure stimulation. This pulling of the weighted beads also makes the product cumbersome to carry around and difficult to wash. So, what starts out as a good idea can end up being more trouble than it's worth.

My initial personal experience with a weighted blanket was with a low quality retail variety, and I ended up feeling more than a little disappointed. It indeed was a challenge to transport and place on my patient properly. The product was very difficult to launder, as it had a removable cover that required me to untie it in a dozen different areas, and I simply did not have time for that in my workday. The patients seemed to like it, but I felt like this product was falling short in so many ways.

Thankfully, with a little more searching I came across a company called CapeAble Weighted Products, which manufactures the high-quality blanket that I had been searching for. Their weighted products have "SmartWeight" technology that contains the glass beads in a two-inch by two-inch square that ensures an even weight distribution.³ The impressive result of this technology is that more nerves are activated in a lighter blanket that does not feel confining. CapeAble's blankets are machine washable, and they even have a medical-

grade material option that can be cleaned with the same type of antimicrobial wipes that are commonly used in dental offices. I couldn't wait to try out this product!

The value of a weighted blanket in the dental office

Fear and anxiety are far too commonly experienced as a part of a dental visit. In fact, according to a 2018 survey conducted by DentaVox on 18,000 people, 61% of people worldwide have a fear of dental visits.⁴ It's one of the main reasons that people avoid dental care, and DentaVox's survey found that 4% of the respondents had never even been to the dentist due to this. I was really hoping that a high-quality weighted blanket could be an effective solution for common dental concerns. I was anticipating that this could be the drug-free and fast-acting patient-care alternative that I had been searching for.

During the past 15 years as a dental hygienist, I have had patients come into my operatory feeling very uneasy about their upcoming treatment and openly displaying the common signs of anxiety. I have felt their rapid heartbeats, heard their shaky voices, and seen their eyes overflowing with tears. These reactions always really bothered me. I have tried my best to comfort them and ease their fears, but I have not always been successful. I found that when I began using a high-quality weighted blanket, my patients' entire demeanor seemed to change, as if a switch had been thrown. They quickly became more relaxed and less tense. Amazingly enough, smiles often crossed their faces. As a result, I became more relaxed too. I knew that they felt comfortable in my care.

I recently had a 10-year-old boy explain to me how he had trouble sleeping the night before his appointment to extract three of his baby teeth. When he showed up that day, I could immediately see the fear in his face as I approached him in the waiting area. I also knew that besides a routine cleaning, he had never had any dental work done, and that it was important to make this a positive experience for him. I asked if he would like to try out

my “special” weighted blanket that helped kids feel more comfortable. He immediately replied, “Yes!”

Once this patient was snuggled up in the dental chair, I waited in anticipation. I had to begin work on another patient in a nearby room, but I could hear what was happening next door. When the doctor came in, he had absolutely no problem getting the young boy numb. There was not a single sound of discomfort. Then, every time one of the boy’s teeth were popped out, I could hear him cry out happily. At the end of the appointment, the boy talked about how he “didn’t feel a thing,” all with a huge smile plastered across his face. The weighted blanket had done its magic. I was thrilled with the results!

How weighted blankets compare to x-ray vests

If you’ve ever had a patient who didn’t want to have the x-ray vest removed, then you can begin to understand the benefits of a weighted blanket. There are a few key components, however, that set the two apart. A high-quality weighted blanket ensures the proper weight distribution for nerve activation, whereas lead vests are an unproven but readily available substitute. The weighted blanket is also far superior when it comes to its comforting feel and appealing appearance of the material. Finally, a weighted blanket conforms perfectly to the patient’s body and stays in place easily.

Weighted products also have the advantage of coming in a variety of sizes. If a patient does not want to use a blanket-size weighted product, there are throw-size blankets and lap pads that can be used to cover different portions of the body. Some patients like to use a weighted throw on their legs, while others prefer to have it draped across their chest. The weight distribution is somewhat heavier in these products, so the same desired effect of nerve activation can be reached.

Benefits for dental professionals

When I first thought about using a weighted blanket, I only thought about calming my patients' fears and anxieties. But as I learned more about this impressive product, I realized that it could benefit all dental professionals. Dentistry is a field that is fast-paced and full of stress, and many of us come home feeling completely exhausted and sore from the day's demands. Using a weighted blanket is a convenient solution that can help you attend to your body's needs so you can be reenergized both mentally and physically for the next day.

I started using a weighted shoulder wrap after a challenging workday to help relieve the tension that I felt in my shoulders. This type of wrap has the option of a magnetic clip so that it can stay put as you move about. When I used this product, I could instantly feel my shoulders stretch downward as the weight of the wrap took effect. I found that if I warmed the wrap in the dryer for a few minutes before using it, the heat would provide me with additional comfort. I felt as though my stress was beginning to melt away as my tension quickly began to dissipate.

Weighted blankets can also help ease fatigue and exhaustion by helping to alleviate insomnia.^{1,2} Almost everyone has trouble falling asleep at some point, and dental professionals can suffer from this, too, as it is difficult to slow down after a fast-paced day. The American Academy of Sleep Medicine says that 15% to 20% of people suffer from insomnia that lasts up to three months, and 10% of people have long-term insomnia.⁵ Having a full supply of energy for the next day is essential for anyone working in dentistry, and making sleep a priority is the best way to make this happen.

A weighted blanket is a product that permanently has a place in my dental arsenal for both me and my patients' needs. For far too long, fear has been a reason that people avoid the dental chair, and it simply does not have to be that way. As a dental hygienist, I aim to

make every patient's experience in my chair as comfortable as possible. If something as simple as a weighted blanket can be the answer, then I'm all for it. And when I come home from a difficult workday, I look forward to having a warm, comforting weighted blanket waiting for me. Cheers to a simple solution for a longstanding dental problem!

References

1. Lockett E. Weighted blankets: Do they work?

Healthline website. <https://www.healthline.com/health/anxiety/do-weighted-blankets-work>.
Reviewed August 29, 2019.

2. What is deep pressure stimulation? AppliedBehavioralAnalysisEdu.org website.
<https://www.appliedbehavioranalysisedu.org/what-is-deep-pressure-stimulation/>.

3. CapeAble Weighted Products home page. <https://www.capeable.com>.

4. DentaVox. Study finds that more than 60% of people suffer from dental fear. *Dental Products Report*. <http://www.dentalproductsreport.com/dental/article/study-finds-more-60-percent-people-suffer-dental-fear>. Published September 13, 2018.

5. Insomnia Awareness Day facts and stats. American Academy of Sleep Medicine website. <http://sleepeducation.org/news/2014/03/10/insomnia-awareness-day-facts-and-stats>. Published March 2014.

AMBER METRO-SANCHEZ, BA, RDH, practices dental hygiene with Chris Bible, DDS, at Comfort Dental in Fort Wayne, Indiana. She works as a professional educator on behalf of Water Pik Inc. and is a contributing author for the Colgate Oral Health Advisor web page. Reach her at ametro76@aol.com.