

The Bump In My Grind

For several years, my dentist, Dr. Jerry, has suspected that I have a secret clenching problem.

"I see certain patterns of wear," he would say.

"Impossible," I would respond. "There must be some other explanation."

"You clench. You grind."

"No!"

"A mouth guard would help."

"Once and for all, I don't grind. I'm kind of a social clencher. One or two before dinner, to relax. Occasionally, at holiday parties and family gatherings, I may gnash a little too much and pay the price for it the next day. But that doesn't mean I have a problem."

"You're in denial."

Actually, I kind of knew I was a sleep grinder. In my middle years, people who lived blocks away would complain of a low, persistent rumble during the night. Many a morning I awoke to find sawdust in my gums and a bedpost missing. A little grinding. Who am I hurting?

And clenching? Clenching? Hey, I'm 51! I have about eight jobs, a moody teenage kid, a divorce, a mother in assisted living, and George W. Bush is in the White House for eight years total! And you're telling me I can't clench my freakin' teeth? It's making me clench my freakin' teeth just to think I can't clench them!

Clenching isn't a disorder. It's a life skill. It's coping strategy. It's a reasonable alternative to shooting up behind dumpsters, which is what I'd be doing if I were not clenching.

And I didn't want a mouth guard. I'm not a good sleeper anyway. Anyone who has ever slept with me—and that includes most of the men of the Family Institute of Connecticut—has felt quite free to point this out. I'm just kidding. About part of that statement. People feel surprisingly comfortable denouncing you, sort of affectionately, for your sleep problems.

"He's not a good sleeper," they tell friends and families and strangers in airport terminals. Would they say that kind of thing if you had similar problems breathing, pooping, achieving nirvana, making saliva, cutting your meat?

As a bad sleeper with everything working in my favor, I had to assume putting a hockey puck in my mouth would only make things worse. And there's something kind of unromantic about sliding between the sheets, turning to face your lover and gently parting your lips to reveal ... a hard rubber doorstop where your tongue is supposed to be. Unless she fantasizes excessively about the Michelin Man, this is going to be a turnoff.

Getting a mouth guard would put me on a course to be an isolative, tragic Dr. Jekyll figure, living alone with my aged housekeeper, Mrs. O'Malley.

"Sure and it's a full moon tonight, Sir. Do you suppose Himself will be comin' out ... Mr. Grind?"

"We can't take any chances, Mrs. O'Malley. Take the usual precautions. Chain me to the radiator and insert the mouth guard."

So I waved away Dr. Jerry. A little grinding? As I said, who am I hurting?

Ow.

Ow!

I awoke on a recent morning with the strong sensation of being a striped bass who had bitten into a fishhook. Like most people of Irish blood, I have a high tolerance for physical pain and none at all for emotional pain. I figured I could tough this out. I got up and tried to start my day. On some heavenly bass boat, Ted Williams and Curt Gowdy set the hook a little deeper and started reeling me in.

OW!!!!!!

Ever the stoic, I drove to Dr. Jerry's office, lay down on the doormat and curled up there whimpering until the practice opened.

"See, I think there may be some kind of TMJ disorder involved," Dr. Jerry said, peering in my mouth.

Of course there is. Along with carpal-tunnel syndrome, chronic fatigue disorder, lactose intolerance and fibromyalgia, Temporomandibular Joint problems are one of the uber-afflictions of 21st Century Schizoid Man. The TMJ is the thing at the back of your jaw, and there's a whole school of Grand Unified TMJ theory that blames it for pretty much everything that's wrong with modern life: migraines, neck pain, bursitis, Stalin, the Kennedy assassinations, Riverdance, you name it.

"I think you really need to try a mouth guard," Dr. Jerry said.

"You can put an inflatable whitewater raft in there if it'll make the pain stop," I groaned.

He made me what is called a NTI-tss. According to the NTI website, the first three letters stand for stands for Nociceptive ("relating to the perception of things that could be harmful"); Trigeminal (the nerve that controls the major muscle of chewing); Inhibition (you will lose interest in sex). And the second three stand for "tension suppression system."

Put them together, and what have you got? An adult binkie. A pacifier for the wars and woes of middle age.

My NTI-tss is a little chunk of space age material that locks onto my front teeth, keeping my jaw from closing. I am supposed to wear it when I sleep, but I can wear it at other times too. Dr. Jerry suggested, "while driving," but I usually talk on my cell phone while driving. My adult binkie makes me sound like I'm understudying Phillip Seymour Hoffman for the lead in "Capote 2 (Revenge of the Mockingbird)."

But I can wear it any other time I might be experiencing tension. For example, I am wearing it right now, while writing this very stressful column. In fact, my overall plan is to wear it whenever I am not eating or talking. Last night I made my parents drive me all the way back to Delaware because they had left it at the motel. No, wait, that's a recovered memory from a childhood vacation.

OK, so I'm a little obsessed with my binkie. My pediatrician says I'll outgrow it by the time I'm 75.

You can hear longtime Northeast columnist Colin McEnroe weekdays from 3 to 6 p.m. on WTIC-AM 1080 in the Hartford area.



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