



CLENCHING AND GRINDING AND STRESS... OH MY!

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WOULDN'T IT BE GREAT IF WE COULD MAGICALLY GET RID of all the stress and anxiety in our lives? Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to be that easy. Our bodies deal with stress in a multitude of ways, but one of the most common places stress manifests itself is in our shoulders, head and neck. The tension we carry in our upper bodies often causes clenching and/or grinding habits, leading to TMJ (temporomandibular joint) dysfunction and associated symptoms like toothaches, headaches, earaches and/or neck pain.

Normal chewing forces place approximately 68 pounds per square inch (PSI) of force on the back teeth. Deliberately clenching your teeth can cause up to 150 PSI, and unconscious grinding at night can increase that pressure up to 900 PSI! The extreme forces that grinding (bruxism) creates can harm teeth in several ways. The most obvious sign of grinding is the noticeable wearing of the enamel on the biting surfaces of the teeth, making teeth more susceptible to decay and fractures.

You may even notice that your fillings and crowns are chipping or fracturing. In addition to wearing enamel and damaging dental work, constant extreme pressure on your teeth aggravates the nerves and can cause sensitivity. Furthermore, grinding can cause the gingival

tissue to recede, thus exposing the root surface, which creates another compromised spot for sensitivity and decay to creep in.

Although clenching may not always show visible signs of wear like grinding does, the extreme force it creates is damaging to teeth and can cause jaw pain or dysfunction of the TMJ. When muscles are over-used during clenching or grinding, in addition to feeling pain, you may even start to hear a clicking or popping sound in your jaw while opening and closing. This is a sign of inflammation/dysfunction in the joint area. The solution may be as easy as wearing a nighttime appliance to keep your jaw in a certain position or require a consult with a TMJ specialist.

Either way, it's best to catch it early before it becomes a bigger issue. It's important to note that although stress is the most likely culprit, clenching and grinding could also be influenced by sleep disorders, certain medications, and even lifestyle choices like smoking, vaping or excessive caffeine/alcohol consumption. If you're noticing any of these signs or symptoms, call your dentist to set up an evaluation to find out which treatment is right for you. It will help alleviate symptoms and save your teeth!

Dr. Kate Gilson

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