

Bruxism. The Stress-Pain connection By Marcus Webb

Key Features of Bruxism

- Grinding sound at night
- Tooth surface wear (noted by dentist)
- Tender muscles around jaw
- Recurrent headaches and/or neck pain
- Fractured fillings or split teeth
- Sore mouth
- Tapping the teeth is tender
- Ridges on the tongue and/or cheeks

Pain can be a worrying symptom when the cause is rather mysterious. If we get an injury we expect to hurt and we have a nice explanation as to why we hurt. Sadly in so many cases if chronic pain and fibromyalgia such a tidy cause and effect relationship rarely exists making pain yet another stressor in an already delicate stress-pain-stress relationship. This article has been written from the physical perspective, not a psychologist. It is my wish to convey the importance of managing the physical aspects of stress while integrating the deeper psychological approached to offer a truly holistic answer.

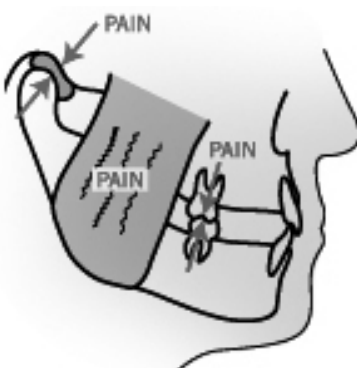
I don't think anyone could argue when I say that we are living in a very stressful world. However, for the most, life in general has probably never been better. In the UK we don't starve or have to worry about contaminated drinking water. Keeping warm may cost a good bit more these days but we are unlikely to suffer in the ways our ancestors did during winter. Add to this our other modern trappings of instant access home entertainment, modern transport and a health service that, whilst it is far from perfect, would not leave you to die in the street after an accident. Put all these factors together and you have the ingredients for what one would consider to be a more happier, healthier and comfortable life than our forebears. However, we are undoubtedly more stressed and some feel more dissatisfied with our lot than ever before. The so-called 'Progress Paradox', or "how life gets better while people feel worse" lies at the centre of this phenomenon. Gregg Easterbrook tackled this fascinating topic, in his aptly entitled book 'The Progress Paradox' for anyone interested in delving deeper.

One area that is commonly neglected is the jaw, or to be more anatomically accurate the temporomandibular joint (TMJ). We rarely consider this joint until it starts clicking and cracking when we eat. A closer look into TMJ dysfunction quickly throws new light on the subject. Studies show that 50% of us have at least one clinical sign, such as muscular tenderness or joint clicking, but only 30% are aware of such symptoms. Interestingly, the peak incidence of symptoms reported by patients attending dental clinics for treatment is between 15 and 45; a very similar age range to that reported in the HSE statistics as being the peak incidence for self reported emotional stress. The concepts of mind-body medicine appears to be slipping back into favor again from the more mechanistic or biomedical approach. When presented with people who display medically unexplained face and head pains an appreciation of the influence of emotional stress on the healthy and balanced functioning of the TMJ becomes clear. Many have noted the powerful effects stress can have on the night time and day time cycles of bruxism, (characterised by clenching, bracing and grinding of the teeth). However, the condition has for many years been associated with an unknown cause despite the far-reaching effects bruxism can have on a persons physical and emotional health ranging from local irritation to the TMJ, tenderness and referred head and face pains through to dizziness and disturbed sleep patterns. It is when sleep is broken that bruxism becomes most troublesome especially if the sleep disturbance occurs during REM stage sleep.

Whilst stress management forms the corner stone in dealing with the more cognitive aspects the use of a non-prescriptive bite guard can offer dramatic results in many cases. Where there is a clicking jaw or even chronic headache and face pain associated with bruxism the use of a flat plane bite splint simply to protect the teeth and apply a gentle traction to the TMJ may be all that is needed in many cases. When opting to trial a non-prescriptive bite guard it is important to remember that a bespoke devise may be required in cases where there is an abnormal dental arch or where repositioning of the jaw is needed. The use of a simple non-prescriptive bite guard can offer speedy relief from the symptoms associated with night time bruxism and reduce the pain generating muscular activity also associated with it. In doing this, the TMJ also gains relief due to the gentle traction effect produced by the bite guard separating the upper from the lower teeth.

Useful resources

- www.totalgard.com
- www.stressgard.co.uk



Bruxism: pain generated in TMJ, jaw muscles and tooth sockets and wear to tooth enamel.



Bite guard fitted: gentle traction to TMJ eases 'pressure pain', reduces muscular spasm and decompresses tooth sockets whilst protecting against excessive wear to the tooth enamel.