Don't Let COVID-19 Stress Grind You Down

The COVID-19 pandemic has had wide-ranging effects, and the lifestyle changes—however big or small—we've had to adapt to have resulted in many of us experiencing levels of stress we may never have encountered before. Financial stress because of job loss or reduced working hours or salary, childcare challenges, adjusting to new work or school systems and routines, the fear of becoming ill or spreading the virus to others, being isolated from family and friends, and even going to the grocery store are just some of the reasons Americans have seen their stress levels climb. This stress can manifest itself in a variety of ways, including mood changes, trouble sleeping, and high blood pressure. It can also cause you to grind your teeth—an oral health condition known as bruxism.

Bruxism results when you repeatedly clench and grind your teeth. It can occur either during the day or at night, and the grinding often takes place when you sleep, so you may not even be aware you are doing it. Some common symptoms include waking up with a headache, toothache, or earache. You may also feel tenderness or pain in your face, jaw muscles, and/or teeth or gums. The force from grinding and clenching can cause teeth to crack or fracture, and when the tooth's enamel is worn away—which happens from the constant rubbing of tooth on tooth—the underlying layer, called dentin, is exposed and can lead to increased tooth sensitivity.

That's why it's important that you keep your twice-a-year dental cleanings and checkups and seek care for issues that could become emergencies. If you're experiencing any symptoms of bruxism, let your dentist know. During your dental visit, your dentist will be able to detect teeth, fillings, or crowns that are worn down because of grinding and offer you solutions to alleviate your discomfort, such as a mouthguard to be worn while you sleep.

Bruxism isn't the only stress-related oral health condition plaguing Americans since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the American Dental Association (ADA), dentists are also reporting an increase in prevalence of these oral health conditions:

- Chipped teeth
- Cracked teeth
- Temporomandibular disorder (TMD) symptoms
- Caries (dental decay)
- Periodontal disease

You also will want to adopt some healthy habits to alleviate your stress. Some proven stress management techniques include exercise (both cardio and strength training), yoga, meditation, unplugging from electronic devices, reading a book, or taking a relaxing bath. Quarantining may also be taking a toll on your mental health—especially for those who live alone—so if you're feeling isolated, try to reach out regularly to friends and family members or set up a weekly Zoom happy hour or other virtual gathering. If you're still having trouble handling stress, contact your physician for other resources that may be available to you.

Without a doubt, these are incredibly challenging times, but paying attention to your stress levels and how they impact your health—overall, oral, and mental—is one of the best things you can do for yourself.