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Four Steps to a Happy Jaw

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Humans are hard-wired to respond to stress by clenching the jaw, and the first place our body registers stress is in the jaw. This sends a message through the muscles of mastication (the masseter, temporalis, and pterygoids) into the amygdala, the part of the brain responsible for our fight-or-flight response.

This response manifests in numerous ways. Accidents and injuries activate it. Perceived danger, such as “Can I pay this month’s rent?” can set it off. Physical stress, like continuing to work despite your aching back, causes the jaw to clench as you deal with the pain. Even mental stress activates this response.

Feel what your body’s first response is to any of these events. I’ll bet you’re feeling your jaw tighten.

Prolonged stress can lead to chronic jaw clenching and, ultimately, temporomandibular joint disorder (TMJD). If left untreated, you may develop neck pain, headaches, or other TMJ-related problems. If your jaw remains clenched over time, the muscles of mastication keep your fight-or-flight switched *on* constantly, which in turn causes those muscles to clench even more as your body braces for the next wave of *perceived* danger.

Break the Cycle

Step one: *Awareness*. Ask yourself what events, activities, or people cause your jaw to clench?

Step two: *Release your body’s hard-wired response* those stressors. Open your mouth slightly. Consciously

relax your jaw. Feel it get heavy. Assist this relaxation by placing your fingers on the sides of your jaw. Let the weight of your fingers draw it down. Then, gently massage your masseter, temporalis muscles and pterygoids inside your mouth as you allow your jaw to become even heavier. When these muscles finally relax, your body slips out of the fight-or-flight response and into a deeper state of relaxation.

Step three: *Change your routine*. If your TMJD flares up every time a problem client calls, refer him to someone else. If you’re clenching to regulate another pain in your body, change the activity or repetitive action causing that pain before your condition worsens.

Step four: *Seek treatment*. Find a skilled CranioSacral Therapist to work with. CranioSacral Therapy’s light touch is ideal for TMJD because it won’t re-traumatize sensitive areas. Since your body stores emotional responses to physical trauma, there may be an underlying emotional issue that needs releasing before your TMJD subsides. Your CranioSacral Therapist can help with this too.

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