

Making Adjustments...

As a species, we are amazingly adaptable. I'm not talking about living at the North Pole. No, I'm talking about the way our bodies can adapt to less than perfect situations. We constantly see patients who get along just fine with less than a full set of teeth that only touch in a few places. We see kids that posture themselves so that they can breathe better because their airway is less than perfect. And of course, we see a slew of adults who overcome TMD (jaw joint problems) with all sorts of learned movements and bite postures. Lucky for us all that we can usually adapt to what God has given us to work with.

As hard as we try, dentistry is still an art and a science. We work the details as hard as any other profession, often measuring our success in micrometers. A one millimeter improvement can indicate success when treating gum disease. Digital radiographs can zoom in on the tiniest defects of our work. We strive for perfection down to the tiniest level by taking precise measurements and models of our work. After all that is done, there is still an art to making the teeth look, fit, and feel harmonious.

So why do we work so hard to be so precise? Well, the mouth is a tough critic. There are a lot of nerves in the teeth, tongue, gums, jaw joints, and chewing muscles that give feedback. These nerves generally like to keep things in balance and will let our patients know if something is off. Fine tuning adjustments are often necessary to make things just perfect.

Recently, we fabricated an orthotic appliance that helps my wife sleep better at night. Actually, my "snore guard" helps me sleep better as well, mainly because Jennifer is not constantly elbowing me and telling me to roll over. The appliance works by fitting over my teeth and holding my lower jaw down and forward. This position opens up the airway and keeps the throat musculature from vibrating when I breathe, thus no more snoring. Now that I wear it, it works great.

It took us about a month of adjustment until I could tolerate the darn thing. Mainly, it took some persistence and patience on my part. We actually only adjusted the appliance a couple of times, the rest of the adjustment was me getting used to it at night. Ask anyone with a nightguard or retainer how natural it is to sleep with a hunk of plastic in their mouths. It takes some getting used to. For me, a good night's sleep is worth it. Just ask my wife.