

## **Maggie's TMJ**

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“You won't have to talk to anyone,” vowed my wife, “you can sit next to the window and nap, read books, or catch up on your journals. No one will bother you. I promise.”

My wife was advocating a tour of Spain for our summer vacation. I, however, hate tours. I hate being told when to wake up in the morning. I hate being told when to get on and off the tour bus. But most of all, I hate having to be nice to, and get into conversations with, others on the tour who I may genuinely not like. I want to be grouchy when I feel like it.

Instead, I longed to spend our vacation on a secluded beach in the Caribbean. But, after being married for 27 years, I have learned the art of compromise: we went on the tour of Spain.

On the second day of the tour, I was staring at a painting in the Salvadore Dali Museum in Girona, straining to hear the heavily accented voice of the museum guide explain the artist's surrealism.

Suddenly, I felt someone tapping my elbow. I turned to see a fellow tourist trying to get my attention.

“Hi,” she said, “my name’s Maggie. We’re on the same tour.”

She had an annoying high-pitched, whining voice that drowned out the tour guide. I instantly disliked her.

“Are you a dentist?” she whined.

I looked around, desperately, for my wife. She wasn’t in sight. “Uh, not at this actual moment, I’m not,” I replied, hoping she’d get the hint.

Subtlety didn’t stop her. “Do you know anything about TMJ?” she continued, “I wake up every morning with terrible headache pains around my ears.”

I gave up trying to hear the museum guide and became interested in what she was saying. In five minutes, I heard her whole life story. She was in her mid-forties, single, lived on the upper East Side in Manhattan, was a physician’s assistant and had been getting terrible TMD-type pains every morning on arising. A

long list of internists, neurologists and chiropractors had not been able to help her.

“Well,” I pronounced, “you’re telling me something very important when you say the pains only happen when you wake up in the morning. Sometimes, people get into the habit of clenching or grinding their teeth at night. The following morning, the muscles and ligaments around the temporo-mandibular joint can become very sore and painful.

“If this is what’s happening to you, you can help yourself by doing two things: First, ask your dentist to make you a soft, nighttime mouthguard. This way, if you can’t stop clenching your teeth at night, the soft rubber will cushion the pressure, and you won’t get such pains.

“Second, try relaxation exercises before bedtime. You can try inhaling and exhaling deeply and slowly, while saying to yourself, ‘Lips together, teeth apart,’ to remind yourself that when we’re at rest, our lips are closed lightly, but our upper and lower teeth have about a pencil thickness of separation between them.

“If you try these things, the pains may get much better,” I concluded. The museum tour was ending. I would never get to find out why Dali portrayed all those melted watches in his paintings. But, I didn’t care. I was a healer. I was a very good person. I had helped a suffering human being.

The following afternoon, our tour stopped at the Maritime Museum in Barcelona. Our tour guide suggested that we picture in our mind’s eye how the Spanish galleons must have looked as they set sail from that very harbor, explorers, conquistadors, and priests sailing for “Glory, gold, and god.”

I felt someone tugging at my elbow. It was Maggie. “You know,” she confided, “I was able to make an appointment for next week, with a very famous neurologist! What do you think he’ll tell me about my headaches?”

My wife was yards away, engrossed in an animated conversation with some new friends, completely oblivious to my suffering.

“What do you think?” insisted Maggie, “what do you think the neurologist will say?”

I put on my concerned dentist face, and found myself using the voice I reserved for explaining full lower dentures to octogenarian patients. “Neurologists are very intelligent and very helpful. But, you might want to consider postponing that appointment for a few weeks, to see if you feel better when you start wearing a soft, nighttime mouthguard, and try those relaxation exercises that we talked about,” I intoned. I proceeded to explain, again, in detail, what I was recommending.

When we got back on the bus, everyone was comparing the wonderful souvenirs that they had purchased while I had been busy with Maggie. My wife smiled at me approvingly, nodded sagely, and said, “Good! I see you’re making an effort to be friendly with the other people on the tour. It’s good for you to relate to other people.”

Our tour spent the next day in Seville. I was trying to capture the entire Christopher Columbus monument in my camera’s

viewfinder when I heard someone clearing her throat next to me. It was Maggie.

“Do you think I should try a new chiropractor?” she whined.

“What did your first chiropractor do?” I asked, as I bought a picture postcard of the Columbus statue, instead of trying to take a picture myself.

“My first chiropractor pushed and hammered at my jaw! It hurt terribly, and he didn’t help me at all!” she recalled.

“What makes you think that a different chiropractor can do any better?” I asked, reasonably. “What you might want to try, is asking your dentist to make a very simple, soft rubbery mouthguard to wear overnight, and doing those muscle relaxing exercises that we spoke about,” I suggested. I found myself speaking very slowly, and enunciating very carefully, as I patiently explained my recommendations again, in excruciating detail.

I was feeling dizzy. I figured I must have been getting dehydrated in the hot Spanish summer.

Two days later, our group was standing at the Carcel de la Inquisicion in Madrid. The guide explained that victims of the Spanish Inquisition would be tortured at length and then burnt at the stake. My eyes were moist as I heard of the horrific acts perpetrated by the Inquisitors.

“Are you saying that my first neurologist misdiagnosed me?” demanded the querulous voice at my side. It was Maggie. “My neurologist took CAT scans of my brain and couldn’t find **anything**,” she said.

“I’m not surprised,” I mumbled.

“Huh?” asked Maggie.

“Oh, nothing,” I said.

My eyes became even moister. “Well, Maggie,” I tried to explain, “different health professionals approach problems from different angles.”

I sensed that I wasn’t getting anywhere. I prided myself on being an excellent communicator. Suddenly, I had an inspiration.

“Maggie,” I pleaded, let’s play a game. Pretend I’m a new patient in your office. I come in complaining that every day at 4:30 in the afternoon, I get a terrible, excruciating pain right in the middle of my forehead. What’s the first thing that you would ask me?”

Maggie’s brows were knitted in concentration. “Would you like to see a neurosurgeon?” she suggested.

“That’s good,” I replied, kindly and gently. “But remember, the pains come every day at exactly 4:30 in the afternoon. Aren’t you going to ask him what he does every day at 4:25?” I prompted.

“Yes!” exclaimed Maggie, “what does he do at 4:25?”

“Well,” I continued our imaginary scenario, “every day at 4:25, I stand up from my computer. I feel very tense. I am very frustrated. I walk over to the wall and bang my head into the wall, very hard, five times.”

“My god, that’s terrible!” Maggie said.

“Yes it is,” I agreed, “but aren’t you going to suggest to the patient that he put on a strong football helmet at 4:20 so that he

doesn't hurt his head, and that he try relaxation exercises to try and get out of this habit?

“In the same manner,” I concluded, “you may wish to wear a soft, rubbery nighttime mouthguard, and try muscle relaxation exercises before bedtime.” I was speaking very, very slowly, in my Mr. Rogers voice and staring at her intently.

“I know,” Maggie nodded, “you're suggesting that I see an acupuncturist!”

That night, in our hotel room, I had difficulty falling asleep. I tossed and turned. I turned the television on and off. I opened and closed the light. My restlessness woke my wife. I explained to her that I had a headache and couldn't sleep.

My wife listened sympathetically. “Sounds to me like TMJ,” she concluded sleepily.