

when the ECONOMY BITES, TEETH SUFFER

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As the economy staggers, more and more people are putting off taking care of their dental needs because food, shelter and jobs are more important. Dentists understand that; your teeth and gums don't. They just are happy being useful. But injured or infected teeth can't heal themselves like the skin or bones can.

Regardless of the economy, decayed teeth are going to continue to decay. Gum and bone disease will spread more, destroy more bone and infect other parts of the body. Cracked teeth will continue to crack. In fact, we know that during stressful times, we clench and grind our teeth more, have more TMJ pain and, generally, more emergency dental needs. Additionally, stress is a major risk factor for periodontal (gum) disease. Devas-tating effects on our dental health can occur in a very short period of time.

the replacement value of your teeth

We all know of someone who lost a home in a fire or a flood. Naturally, when such a disaster happens, the owner researches his or her insurance policy and, hopefully, the home will be covered for "replacement cost"—meaning the insurance company will reimburse the owner for the cost of rebuilding the home.

Using the same thought process to determine the replacement value of teeth, the dollar sum of replacing all of them would be a staggering \$98,000 to \$140,000. Think about this before you consider that crazy. Not counting wisdom teeth, everyone should have 14 teeth on the upper and 14 on the lower. Each healthy tooth sits in solid bone and is its own entity, just like a house and its foundation. If a burned-down or flooded house is rebuilt, the foundation must be removed and replaced first. If a tooth is lost, replacement to the original state would require a surgically placed implant and sometimes even a bone graft, just like the new foundation of a home. The new tooth would also require a porcelain crown that would represent the house. Fees for this one tooth range from \$3,500 to \$5,000 depending on the area you live in and the skill of the doctor. Multiply those figures by 28 and you will get the un-

believable replacement cost I mentioned above. (Now certainly there are options to replace a missing tooth that are much less costly, but you get the point. We are talking about "replacement value.")

rationalizing what we buy

There have been Christmastime riots over Air Jordan tennis shoes. There were mobs demanding to be the first to pay \$180 for a pair of shoes. Nike has done a better job of making tennis shoes appear more necessary for the good life than the dental profession has done with teeth. After all, each lost tooth is a lost body part! The integrity and balance of our jaws and bite are sacrificed with each newly lost tooth.

It is easy to rationalize buying something you want—shoes, a car, diamond ring, etc. On the other hand, it is even easier to rationalize not doing something like dieting or going to the dentist, right? I mean who wants to have someone stick their hands in your mouth, poke around and then tell you the bad news? (We like to say that the perception of an examination is quite different in our office, but nonetheless, when a dental tragedy happens, the bad news and the cost investment inevitably follows.)

below are today's top reasons for not seeing a dentist:

- No dental insurance
- The economy
- Lost job
- Insurance will not pay for the service
- Hate dentist
- Kids in college
- Single parent
- Don't want to hear the bad news
- Every time I go, something is wrong

what to do

Never depend on your "insurance" to take care of your total dental needs. There is no such thing as dental "insurance," especially replacement insurance. Dental insurance is only akin to a meager dental "coupon," often not worth much more than you pay for it. If a dental insurance policy sounds like it is going to take care of your every need, I can assure you that it will not. There is no free lunch when it comes to dental insurance.

It only makes sense to go to the dentist at least on a yearly basis—and usually more often—and it is vastly important you find one that you like and trust. If each and every time you go to a dentist for a check-up, something is always wrong, something is not right. You need to be open and honest with your dentist, and trust/hope that he or she will be the same with you. After all, it is your health, your teeth and your money.

Call your dentist or find one with whom you are comfortable. Your teeth will pay you back by serving you for years to come. Your health, speech, comfort and appearance are at stake. ■

