

We're all naughty children who should know better

By Ruth Ostrow

"THE gas, where is the gas?" I demand, scouring the room in a panic. Sitting in the dentist's chair is never a pleasant experience, far less pleasant if your new dentist doesn't believe in what is commonly called "laughing gas".

"But I always have gas," I explain, to no avail. The dentist is ignoring my pleading eyes and preparing her instruments of torture.

"I feel I need the gas because I'm afraid. I get anxious," I say, trying not to sound like a drug addict. The fact is that I actually don't much enjoy the effects of the gas. I overdosed on the stuff during child-birth and find myself getting nauseous if I have too much.

However, I'm a hopeless coward when it comes to pain. Even my years of experience with yoga and controlled breathing have not changed that.

"I give gas for major dental work but not for a minor clean," she explains. "It is unnecessary."

"It's necessary for me, because I often forget to floss and I come here instead on a regular basis to get my teeth cleaned, but because I don't floss enough my gums are very sensitive and it can really hurt.

"The gas helps me to relax. And then it's over just like that," I say clicking my fingers.

"Well, perhaps if you found this experience less pleasant, you might want to avoid it by flossing your teeth more often," she says with a smile, cool, correct, and too logical by half. She begins the process, bringing out something that makes a severe drilling noise.

"This is to remove the plaque and tartar which needs to be broken down.

"You have quite a lot around your teeth. You really will have to floss more," she chastises as the awful sound begins.

I feel like a naughty child, and then it occurs to me that there's part of us all that is a naughty child. A naughty child who eats lollies and forgets to clean and floss their teeth.

We are out there by the millions, long grown, educated, we know better, and still we misbehave anyway.

"Ouch," I scream as she hits a nerve.

"You're teeth are very sensitive because the gum is receding in places and the nerve has become exposed," she says.

"This is due to bacteria due to inadequate dental hygiene."

I want to argue that that's exactly why I need gas. But she is quick to launch into another rave.

"If you don't want the pain then I suggest the best way to handle it is to be diligent with your cleaning.

"Otherwise this is the least of what you will be putting up with over the coming decades." Naughty children. We are pain-averse. We want to eat rich food, but we find it boring or difficult to go for a run each morning. Cycling hurts our lazy legs.

And flossing can be painful and very disagreeable.

So people avoid doing the adult thing, and end up having to deal with much bigger pain as a result: arthritis, osteoporosis, gingivitis of the gums, teeth loss, or weight-related disorders.

I know that if I insisted on gas the dentist would eventually give in, but I endure the pain because I want the unpleasant experience to be etched into my memory.

And because I know she is right.

Having access to doctors, medicines, gas, drugs, makes it all too easy for us to not parent ourselves, but put the responsibility onto others to make it better.

Often our lover or and partner becomes the authority figure, the "mummy" surrogate for our inner naughty child.

Don't forget to clean your teeth, I have heard grown women tell their men.

My partner was forever cutting up fresh fruit for me to eat and I was always telling him to put on sun block, forever rubbing it over his nose.

Largely because I couldn't bear the complaining when he got sunburnt.

Plus I knew it would be me taking him to have potential skin cancers burned off.

In the end I left him to his own devices and he got sunburnt and felt shocking, and then he started wearing sun block of his own volition. In the end, I had three colds in one year -- two of which turned into nasty chest infections -- and I now make myself fresh fruit juice and eat the recommended dose of vitamin C each day.

In short, we each learned to parent ourselves.

And in the end the dentist has said "no" to making my visit a trippy, fabulous, 3-D bliss-bomb experience, so that I can be conscious of every sensitivity.

Without gas I can now feel how much gum damage has really occurred, and can see the consequences if I keep up this neglect.

She's done a good job this new dentist -- as much with my psyche as with my teeth.

Her approach has reminded me that when it comes to our health, we have to grow up and take responsibility for our own well-being. Let's just say she quite literally hit a raw nerve.

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