

Facts & Arguments: THE ESSAY

Confessions of a lapsed flosser

Tonight could be the night I stare down my nemesis, and say no to the guilt of not flossing

ROBIN ARMSTRONG
SUBMISSIONS: FACTS@GLOBEANDMAIL.COM
OCTOBER 27, 2008

Every night I wearily approach the bathroom, the dim light from the bedroom outlining the silhouette of the little white container on the counter.

That little white container of all my guilt and self-loathing stares back at me, its flossy little tail poking out, inviting me to pick it up, and mocking me, knowing that I won't. I pause for a moment, considering my options, but fatigue sets in and I retreat to the warm glow of the bedroom.

I have a confession: I don't floss my teeth. That doesn't sound good. I do floss - just not enough. I'm sure I'm not alone in that. The dental hygienist sounds much too rehearsed when she gives me the lecture - year after year - about my bleeding gums.

"But I'm a mouth breather," I think. "I'm a redhead, we're more sensitive."

Print Edition - Section Front



[Enlarge Image](#)



I understand the devastating effects of gingivitis, and I do want to keep these teeth for the rest of my life. But I just can't bring myself to practise this simple personal habit.

It has become the ultimate symbol for all the things I don't do that perhaps I should. Like dusting. Or not waiting until the last minute to figure out what's for dinner. Or meditating. Or going to church, or temple. I have to figure that one out.

I've tried getting my husband in on it, lecturing him on the virtues of flossing, reminding him of our lack of dental coverage and that we won't be able to afford expensive gum surgery. I'm hoping he'll pick up the habit and I'll be forced to follow.

I've been a procrastinator in my life - like anyone who has been a student - but that's different from not adopting a habit all good people with common sense know to adopt. What is it about human beings that we can't commit to changing our lifestyle or habits despite all the guilt we carry around from not doing so?

I asked my friend Julia, a life coach with seemingly impeccable dental hygiene, why people have such difficulty adopting new habits - without confessing my personal battle.

Julia tells me, in a way that says she's been asked this before, that habit-shifting entails a number of steps, and that often people don't consider all the steps before they begin. This is why they get stuck and are ultimately unsuccessful.

She uses brushing our teeth as an example of a well-formed habit - thank God she didn't use flossing. Julia explained that brushing our teeth wasn't always a natural habit, and that when we begin a new routine it feels unnatural at first. I'm alarmed to hear it can take from one to four months before a habit becomes my habit. I don't think I can handle the stress of 30 nightly showdowns - that flossy little guy is a worthy adversary.

I've observed the difficulty of habit-shifting in my professional life. As a chiropractor and former personal trainer, I have seen people come to me with a new purpose, full of hope and determination to change - whether it's to beat their back pain once and for all or to get back to their "wedding weight" - only to slip into old habits a few weeks later, or simply not adopt the new ones.

Some days I don't even know why I bother asking my patients, "How are your exercises going?" Suddenly the roles are reversed: I'm playing the "spinal hygienist" with my menacing stare and lecture on the importance of abdominal strength. So I have compassion - I am, after all, a lapsed flosser.

But I don't seem to have this same compassion for myself. I see my athletic 54-year-old mother, who competes annually at the duathlon world championships, dutifully going out for her training runs day after day, rain, sleet or snow. I wonder why I didn't inherit her commitment.

Yet at my age, she had to undergo painful gum surgery. I thought it was because of faulty genetics - and according to my grandmother, who also has poor gums, it is. But alas, my mother tells me she was told at 20 that she would need gum surgery if she didn't floss more, and she didn't.

So is this how it works? My mother is a dedicated athlete but a lapsing flosser like myself? If we are committed in one area, do we have to fail in another? It's hard to accept that because I am committed to drinking eight glasses of water a day, I've tapped out my commitment stores.

I may not floss, but I am really good at returning phone calls, cleaning the bathroom once a week, saying thank you and cutting my nails before they get too long.

The hard part about shifting a habit is all the negative reinforcement that goes along with repeatedly trying and failing. Perhaps to not do is human?

That's it, no more negative self-talk. Tonight could be the night I stare down that flossy tail, and say yes to life and no to the guilt of not flossing.

Although, if it's late, I might just brush my teeth and call it a night.

Robin Armstrong lives in

Vancouver.

© Copyright 2008 CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.

CTVglobemedia

globeandmail.com and The Globe and Mail are divisions of CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc., 444 Front St. W., Toronto, ON Canada M5V 2S9
Phillip Crawley, Publisher