

Bracing Past 40: Maintaining a Beautiful Smile for a Lifetime

By Deborah C. Umrani

Shifts happen! But you don't have to wallow in it.

I can't pinpoint the day that it began to happen, but I know the day I noticed that my smile was changing. My teeth had developed a mind of their own and they were shifting, spreading apart, moving away from each other as if they were no long members of the same family. This would not have been a bad thing, if there was not this collective human perception of what a beautiful smile should look like. Beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, but when it comes to your smile, we have preconceived notions regarding what beautiful is. It is unequivocally determined by eons of past photographs of straight teeth, a dental marker that speaks volumes.

We might not believe it, but our teeth are important to our sense of who we are and how we look. Even the ugliest face can be brightened and beautified with a smile. When shifts happen, the first response is to shut down your smile. How can I let others see the results of the war that is going on in my mouth? My teeth are at odds with each other, my gums are receding. It is a look that I care not to share with anyone. I developed a habit of smiling with my mouth closed, not a Mona Lisa smile, but a smile hoping that no one would notice the ugliness that was within my mouth, hiding behind my lips.

The ravages of gum disease, bone decay, and yellowing teeth are part and parcel of growing older, but, in my case, it was mostly caused by slovenly dental hygiene habits and the failure to keep dental appointments. Once I made the decision to do something about my ugly mouth, I began seeking out the expertise of dental specialists. I went to many and they did what they do: clean your teeth and tell you to come back. The problem grew worse. One dentist told me there was nothing he could do and referred me to the people who ultimately saved my face. I did not follow through, because I was looking for a quick fix, and one that my insurance would pay for.

This is the reality, at a certain point, one has to step out and do what needs to be done. I'd heard a number of times that I might need a dental implant. So I went to a dentist whose office was near my workplace. She cleaned my teeth and referred me to a friend of hers who had an office in Water Tower Place - a high-end, high rent district. The friend conducted the evaluation, proposed an implant, provided a price quote and told me when to return. The problem was: the shifts had already happened! I needed more than an implant. The spacing in my mouth was so absurd that following her plan would have given me one big tooth and one normal tooth in the front of my mouth. That would have been a weird smile. I backed away from following her advice. Something was seriously wrong with that picture.

The problem with my mouth plagued me. It tortured me. I would go to church and get into prayer lines to have them pray that my mouth would be made whole. I was desperate. One morning, I had a vision that I had a beautiful smile. It was not like the smile of my youth, which

had a gap between my frontal incisors, two front teeth. It was a gapless, beautiful smile. Soon after that, I received a postcard offering a free dental evaluation from the dental office I had been referred to years and many dentists earlier. I made an appointment, rescheduled it and finally made one that I kept.

I entered the office not knowing what would be the outcome. I had no expectations, other than I would not have to pay for bad advice. The dentist came in and introduced herself: I am Dr. Ferguson. She explained what she was going to do and silently went about the process of looking into my mouth, probing and peeking. When she finished, she sat back and said, “We can help you. It will take time, but we can help you.” What she proposed was a holistic dental approach to healing all that had gone wrong in my mouth for years. My gums had bled all of my life. She talked to me about why this happened and that it did not have to be. She developed a plan that would walk me back to a beautiful smile.

The plan included deep cleanings, tooth extractions, root canal, and braces. I was well past 40 and part of the solution to my problem was to wear braces? Braces are for teens; the awkward years of finding one’s self identity. I knew who I was. I was a middle-aged woman...who had an awfully ugly smile. I submitted and listened to the proposal. I tried to backtrack in my mind, if I had only taken better care of my teeth; but I had not done so. The regret mounted, but I wanted to be able to smile and laugh again.

Dr. Ferguson pulled together a team of experts. The funny thing is that they call themselves “The Dental Dream Team.” They united to save my face by restoring my smile. First, they had to get rid of all the things that caused and were maintaining the problem: gingivitis (gum disease), partially-erupted wisdom teeth, and bone loss. With the precision of a championship team, they eradicated the problems. I can now say, like a person at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, “My name is Deborah and I have been free from gum disease for fourteen years.” Go ahead and cheer!!!

Choosing to go into braces was a deliberate choice. I made the decision with my eyes wide open. The nice thing about it is that I had options. The regular orthodontics process takes about two to three years. There is a new process called ‘fast ortho’ that speeds up the process and shortens the time by half, from nine months to one year. I took the fast track.

One also has choices with regard to the kind of braces one will wear: the regular metal braces which are affixed to the frontal portion of the tooth; lingual braces, which are braces that are affixed to the interior portion of the tooth, near the tongue; and Invisalign, which is a clear plastic molded brace that fits over your teeth – to provide a more transparent molding of your teeth. Traditionally, you see the orthodontist once a month and adjustments are made to the braces to shift the teeth to the predetermined spacing. The same is true for the interior braces. With fast ortho, you go in once every 14 days to have the adjustments made to the braces. You

can choose any type of brace with fast ortho. The frequency of visits to the orthodontist is what makes the difference.

The challenge with regular metal or lingual braces is food: certain food gets stuck in the braces; some of the plastics will yellow after a mustard, curry or turmeric loaded meal; and you cannot eat nuts and certain kinds of candy, such as hard candy and caramel. Nuts and hard candy can break the wires on your braces and gooey candy can get stuck between your teeth and braces and impact your dental hygiene. Dental hygiene is incredibly important during this period and your teeth must be cleaned two or more times a year. I was put on a quarterly cleaning regimen. Braces force you to brush after every meal. If you don't, everyone will know what you had for lunch because the residue of your sandwich, salad, and punch that will have wrapped itself around your braces. Trust me, it looks awful!

Invisalign may be a solution to this, but Invisalign comes with another set of challenges. Invisalign discolors from food very quickly; you may need to remove them to eat, which increases your chances of losing them; you have to clean them often with denture cleaning solutions or your breath will be very foul; and if they are not fitted properly, you will have a lisp – an echo behind every word you speak. The lisp, however, is easily remedied by adjusting the height of the brace along the gumline.

I followed the regimen outlined by my Dental Dream Team. I ignored the astonished looks of others when they saw my braces and the chiding by friends who would call me: 'metal mouth' or 'Alvin the Chipmunk.' I was walking boldly toward my new smile.

The last step in the process toward my smile was a dental implant. The shift that happened had impaired the bone structure and the tooth had to be removed and replaced. There was a need to reconstruct the bone tissue and build it back up so that it could support the implant. So while I was bracing, and in retainer mode, they took out the tooth and gave me an Invisalign retainer with a tooth in it; they began the work of inserting the implant. The Invisalign retainer made it look as if the work had been completed. The steps included building up the bone tissue, inserting the foundation for the implant into the bone, letting it heal, inserting a temporary implant and then, one day, I received the real implant.

I had reached my goal. The vision of a beautiful smile was a reality! The Dental Dream Team and I had worked together to achieve my beautiful smile. Their candid assessment of my condition at the beginning and their willingness to work together to devise a plan of action yielded an outcome that is phenomenal. I have come a long way.

Now, when the dental hygienists are training others, they use my mouth to demonstrate good dental hygiene. I never would have imagined that I could be the poster girl for excellent dental hygiene. But it all began with a decision to stop putting off taking care of my teeth. I know that age is only a number when it comes to maintaining a beautiful smile. At any age, you can decide to step outside your comfort zone. You too can have a beautiful smile. Do what you have to do:

deep clean, extract, root canal, implant, and/or brace. But do it and enjoy decades of pleasure in opening your mouth with your own teeth and smile like a Cheshire Cat!

Side Bar

Choosing Your Dental Dream Team

I was fortunate to have found a dental team that shared the same office space: Dr. Robin Ferguson (General Dentistry), Dr. Yetta McCullom (Periodontics) and Dr. Cornell McCullom (Oral Surgery). They referred me to Dr. Neil Warshawsky to take care of my orthodontic needs. The benefits of having them in the same office included their access to each other's expertise at an instant when dealing with my dental care. This meant I had immediate, free consultations on how to handle problems and to develop a plan of action. I did not have to call and set up an appointment to see the other specialists; they were right there to take a peek in my mouth or look at x-rays or to ask me questions. They worked as a team to facilitate my progress through the process. After hours, they would meet and discuss the plan and they kept me abreast of what was happening. They could also share x-rays and photographs, which reduced the costs and my exposure to radiation from the x-rays. They worked as a team and I reaped the benefits of their partnership.

In addition, they displayed a level of professionalism that was astounding. As individuals and as business owners, they run a tight ship. I have been around the block a few times when it comes to dentists, and I can say assuredly that Dr. Ferguson and the Drs. McCullom are the most professional dentists with whom I have ever worked. They are pleasant, committed, and perfectionists. Their office is immaculate. Their staff is professional and courteous. They really make you feel as if you are a part of their family. They are also very conscientious about washing their hands before they examine your teeth and even before touching the gloves. They recognize that the gloves are not only to keep them safe from bacteria or viruses their patients may carry, but also to keep you safe from other bacteria that their hands may come into contact with.

In the final analysis, the cost of my smile was well worth it. My Team was prompt at billing the insurance company and I was reimbursed for all covered services. They also assisted me in identifying alternative means of paying for the services. There are credit card companies that specialize in health related services at affordable interest rates.

When you choose a dentist, be sure to find out what services they provide in-house and how far away their associated specialists are. Ask how close they work together? Do they share x-rays? Are there additional consultation costs? Do they share the same philosophy regarding patient care? Although Dr. Warshawsky did not share the same office space, they were in contact via telephone, email, and electronically shared x-rays and other documents. They also collaborated

on professional presentations at conferences and training other dentists in the techniques they have perfected.

When you choose a team, choose wisely. It can make the difference between a smooth and peaceful transition to a beautiful and one that is frustrating and complicated. Happy smiling!!!