

Stress: The Vicious Circle

Time · food · sleep · energy · movement · where the loop starts, how it closes and where the dentist can break it



Say it to the patient: "Your jaw pain, your sleep and the time you eat in the evening are one story, not three. Change the time you eat and the rest of the circle starts to turn the other way."

LEARN MORE

Elevate Regulate, the nervous system and wellbeing course: elevate-dent.com
Pairs with the **Sleep, Wellbeing & the Airway** cheat sheet

The loop in one sentence

Stress rarely starts in the head; it starts in the diary. When time is not managed, food is not managed. When food is late and poor, sleep is poor. When sleep is poor, energy goes, weight climbs, exercise stops, and the chemistry that would have lifted the mood is never made. The circle then feeds itself.

The six links and where to break them

Link	What happens	Break it with
1 Time	Diary overruns push meals and bedtime later. No protected time, no routine.	Book meals and bedtime like appointments. Finish on time.
2 Food	Stressed and low, people reach for fast, processed and sugary food: a twenty-minute lift.	Decide the evening meal before the day starts. Protein first.
3 Timing	The stomach needs about four hours to empty. A full stomach means reflux and lighter sleep.	Kitchen closed three to four hours before bed.
4 Sleep	Most melatonin and serotonin are made in the gut; late digestion disrupts them. Short sleep raises appetite (Spiegel 2004).	Fixed wake time. Caffeine off at midday. The ten rules.
5 Energy	Tiredness drives caffeine and sugar; weight climbs, the airway narrows, sleep worsens again.	A ten-minute walk after lunch instead of the coffee.
6 Moving	Muscle releases myokines; irisin crosses into the brain and raises BDNF. Stop, and mood falls within days.	Twenty minutes daily; strength twice a week.

What the dentist sees

- **Clenching and bruxism** that escalate with a life event; the splint that suddenly feels tight.
- **A TMD flare** that follows stress rather than trauma: muscle tenderness, reduced opening, morning ache.
- **Erosion, caries and dry mouth** from late sugary snacking, reflux and caffeine.
- **Oral hygiene that collapses** when the routine collapses; the patient who stops attending.
- **The airway story:** weight gain, snoring, unrefreshing sleep and the morning headache.

Four questions that take 60 seconds

- 1 **When did you last eat last night**, and what was it?
- 2 **How many hours did you sleep**, and did you wake refreshed?
- 3 **When was your last coffee** yesterday?
- 4 **When did you last move** for twenty minutes without stopping?

The science in brief

- **Gastric emptying:** a mixed meal takes roughly four hours to leave the stomach; fat and volume slow it further.
- **The gut and sleep:** enterochromaffin cells hold the body's largest pool of melatonin and most of its serotonin; gut timing and sleep timing are linked.
- **Sleep loss and appetite:** two nights of four hours' sleep raise ghrelin, lower leptin and increase hunger for sweet and salty food (Spiegel 2004).
- **Myokines:** exercise releases irisin from muscle (Boström 2012); it crosses the blood-brain barrier and raises BDNF, hence the 'hope molecule' label.

The clinician's own circle

The same loop runs in the practice: the late list, the missed lunch, the 9 pm dinner. A dentist who manages the diary manages the rest.