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The Addiction of Bad Habits: A Curious Story About Flossing, by Rita Rivest

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For the past 29 years, I have been successfully recovering from alcoholism and an eating disorder, two uncontrollable monsters that had brought me to a place in my life where I was unrecognizable to myself and those around me. However, over the same course of time I was powerless over the bad habit of ignoring the health of my teeth and gums. Yes, I clobbered two deadly diseases. Yet when it came to dental floss, I just couldn't take charge.

Along the way, I've learned the true meanings of and differences between addictions and habits. This is what I have come up with:

Addictions will ultimately define our lives because we are stripped of the ability to recognize cause and effect. Because of self-deception, we end up at the mercy of a fate of loss and abandonment and the haunting reality of who we COULD have been. Oscar Wilde's notion of using your talent for work and your genius for living becomes a painful reminder of what loss can really mean. Habits, on the other hand, can impair the quality of our lives and keep us from enjoying and fully engaging in life. Bad habits will usually overtake us when we're hungry, angry, lonely or tired — and procrastination is definitely the kingpin. Habits are far easier to manage when we're feeling good about ourselves.

How did I finally get a grip on my floss resistance?

A number of years ago, my dentist told me in his not-so-subtle manner, after one of my routine cleanings, that I should only floss the teeth I wanted to keep. The correlation between flossing and heart health had not yet been established, so he was just referring to my neon gums that looked like they were about to let go of my teeth. He remarked that the rest of me was in fine shape — what was the deal with not flossing?

I flossed now and then, if at all, because I had a life. Generally, I flossed when I noticed that my gums looked and felt like they were wounded or some food stuff had made its way between my teeth and had to be forcibly removed.

Being someone who thrives on maintaining good habits to the point of compulsivity, and,

as a practicing life coach who spends the greater part of life helping other people shift into positive-habit action mode, I realized that there was something about this flossing thing that smacked of defiance. It became clear that some part of me just needed a place to hang the badge of honor of resistance, and flossing seemed to be it. After all, I had plenty of time for all kinds of other activities. Cognitive therapy wasn't the answer, and my mother had nothing to do with this. Action was the answer — I would have to floss.

Making a shift to add flossing to my daily routine was a big deal, because I didn't want to. Being the master of multitasking, I had to set it up so other things could be done at the same time that would not involve my hands, since they would be engaged with plastic thread.

And so I decided to use "floss time" to not think about anything except what was working in my life. It was a sort of stream-of-consciousness gratitude list. While I was at it, I decided to haul my leg up on the counter and stretch out my hamstrings, the very ones that caused me to grunt when I leaned over to pick a paper clip off the floor, the result of all that aerobic activity I had time for and way too little stretching. I started noticing that my "floss time" was expanding after I realized that I was holding my breath not just while I flossed and thought and stretched — but MOST of the time. I decided that maybe I could take a little time with intention to "BREATHE" while I was standing there. Another great concept but one that required at least another couple of minutes.

And so Floss/Think/Stretch/Breathe made its way into my life and has been here ever since. My "floss time" has expanded to deep knee lunges with my foot on the countertop, calf stretches, neck and jaw release and waist stretches.

THE GUMS ARE GOOD! My dentist is happy. My hamstrings are thrilled. I'm far more conscious of my breathing when I'm out of the bathroom ... all because of a shift out of defiance and denial.

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