

Non-odontogenic sources of oral facial pain exist and it is likely they are more common than one considers. At times they can convincingly ape irreversible pulpitis or symptomatic apical periodontitis. Somatoform disorders (i.e. grey matter issues) are psychological disorders characterised by the presence of physical symptoms that are not fully explained by a dental/medical condition, the effects of a substance, or another mental issue. The symptoms can cause significant distress and are not intentional. This disorder is rarely admitted; do not assume that a typical medical history can be taken at face value.

The challenge is to recognise it early. Often it is discovered only after the response to a seemingly routine procedure is remarkably dissatisfactory. It is quintessential to fully assess objective findings without an undue reliance upon subjective complaints. Below is a summary of some of its distinguishing features:

Symptoms:

- No dental condition or substance induced cause can fully account for the symptoms
- A plausible history, but organic symptoms inconsistent with physical findings
- Often no symptoms were present prior to a single precipitating dental procedure
- No improvement despite the best efforts of several previous practitioners
- Symptoms consume an inordinate amount of time and attention for the person
- Symptoms lead to avoidance or curtailment of many activities
- Extended duration of symptoms (weeks, months, or years)

Patient:

- Attempts to dictate diagnosis and control treatment
- Cries easily out of frustration
- Maligns previous practitioners, regardless of apparent quality of care or treatment
- May deny seeing multiple practitioners concurrently
- A history of lengthy appointments
- A history of psychiatric, psychological, or mental issues that is often repudiated
- Oftimes non-compliant with counselling and medications
- Showers one with compliments at initial appointment
- The first intervention may be reported to be extraordinarily successful but it can soon be blamed for an exponential increase in pain and suffering

Pain, when present, is:

- Poorly localised but described with precision
- Varies in intensity and is occasionally bilateral
- Described as debilitating yet the person does not appear overtly distressed

In essence, there is a lack of objective findings supportive of a barrage of subjective complaints. Yet heed the fact, it is not pathognomonic if such a disconnect exists and the person has a history of grey matter issues. Another complicating factor is the apparent quality of endodontic treatment is independent of symptoms when a somatoform disorder is afoot. When in doubt refrain from adjunct procedures and consider a referral to a colleague, a physician, or a certified specialist. If unrecognised, a somatoform disorder can quickly impose upon the unsuspecting practitioner severe negative emotional, financial, disciplinary, and legal consequences. Endo is a big issue about a little tissue; a somatoform disorder is a big issue about a lot of grey tissue.

Regards,



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Debilitating pain, despite best efforts of several specialists



No pain despite less than ideal Endo



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