

# Toothache

Category: Microaggressions: a Thousand Cuts

written by Ronna L. Edelstein | May 1, 2026

“Didn’t you wear braces when you were a teenager?” my older brother recently asked me.

“You’re really having your picture put in the yearbook?” one of my eighth-grade students inquired.

A sixth-grader gave me the name of her orthodontist, “just in case you are interested.”

My dentist handed me a pamphlet on dental implants, “that you may consider undergoing.”

And to end the school year, a class of eighth-graders gifted me with a porcelain beaver; they laughed uncontrollably as I opened the box and saw its contents. Knowing that they viewed me as a buck-toothed beaver made me teary-eyed.

These acts of microaggression have left me with emotional scars that will never heal. They remind me, in subtle ways, that my two upper front teeth are larger than they should be and detract from my appearance. They have affected my post-divorce dating life, convincing me that no rational man would date someone with imperfect teeth. They have affected my willingness to smile, making people believe that I am a sour person who does not find happiness in life. They have affected my overall self-image, already a negative one due to my tall height, which makes me feel like a Brobdingnag in a world of Lilliputians.

I have never believed in the saying that “sticks and stones may break your bones, but words will never hurt you.” Bones heal, but the consequences of words, especially those that convey negative meaning, even when delivered with subtlety, leave lasting harm. I rarely go out with other women, but when I do, I believe they are staring at my mouth with distaste. When I brush my teeth, I do not look in the mirror; I don’t need a piece of glass to tell me what my heart knows—that my two front teeth are ugly and make it impossible for me to be anything but ugly as well. Too many comments from others leave no room for doubt that people notice my teeth and define me by their imperfection.

Even after a “no cavities” examination, I exit the dentist’s office with a toothache. No drill can eliminate the microaggressions about my teeth that have followed me throughout my life—and made me an insecure, often depressed person.

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