

New Toronto clinic offers sweet news for halitosis-sufferers

Just like a breath of fresh air

By SANDY NAIMAN
Toronto Sun

Until recently, Maggie Winters and her husband wouldn't kiss each other when making love — not because they didn't want to, but because her breath smelled so foul that he couldn't stand being within kissing distance.

"Sometimes it was so bad," the 30-year-old sales executive told me, insisting I not use her real name, "he'd say, 'Don't talk to me right now. Go brush your teeth.'"

"But I had just brushed my teeth. It was very hurtful. There was nothing I could do. I'd just go and sit on another sofa."

The cultural slings and arrows of bad breath are painful and insidious and people with serious cases of chronic bad breath, like Winters, can feel like social outcasts.

However, bad breath is bad breath. Even in less serious cases, it's an invisible problem, apparent only to others. The irony is they rarely inform you of it, so you can't deal with it.

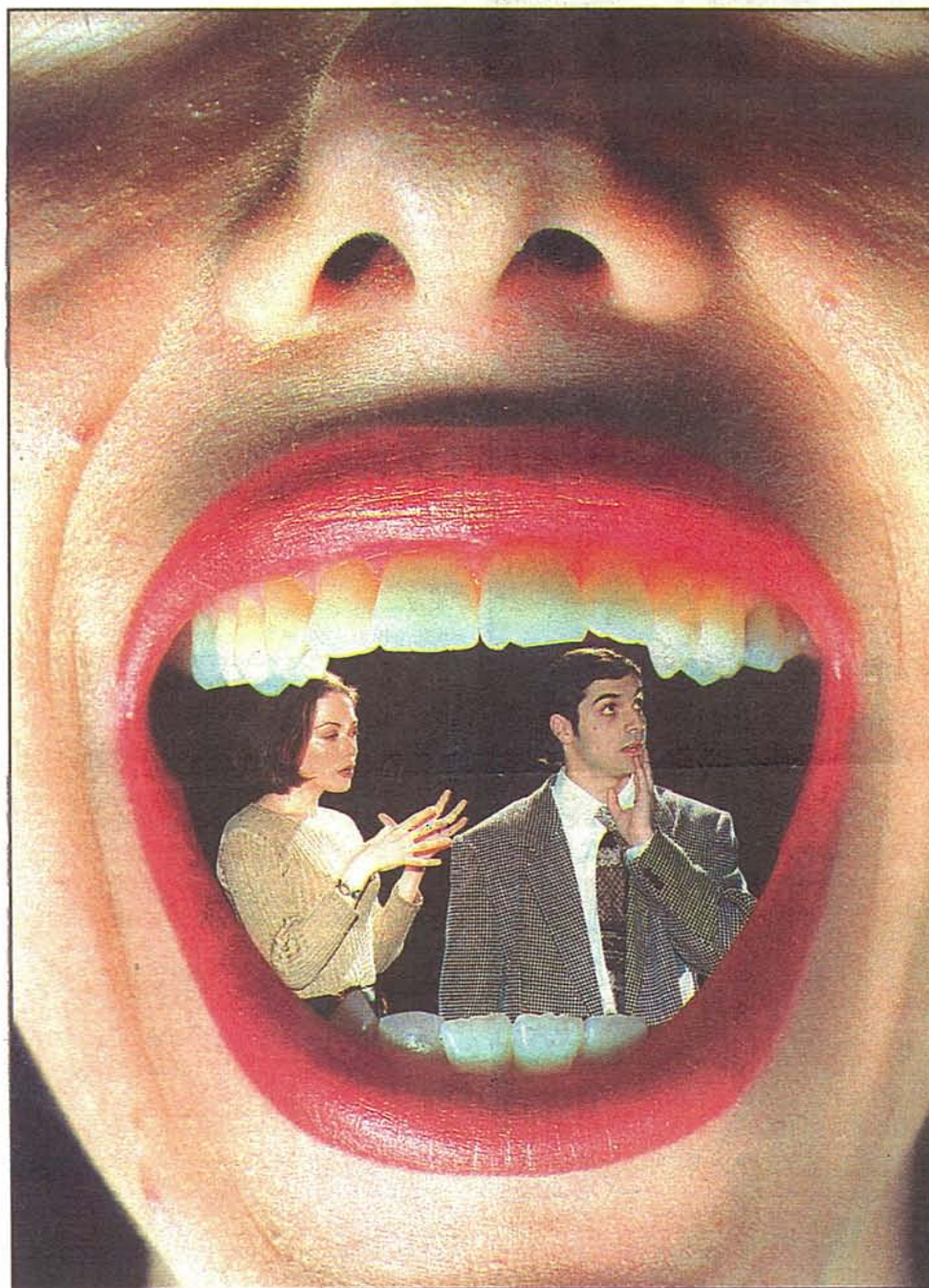
It's a miracle. My husband and I are kissing again

— 'Maggie Winters' beat bad breath

Winters became aware of her bad breath five years ago. At first, it was transient, but last year, it became constant. "I could feel it, smell it and taste it, after I brushed my teeth."

You can have chronic bad breath, like Winters, caused by an imbalance in the bacterial culture of the mouth, with no other mitigating medical problems. It can be secondary to another medical problem, as grave as cancer or as benign as dry mouth. Or you can have intermittent, easily corrected, non-chronic bad breath, due to poor oral hygiene or a fondness for certain foods like onions or garlic. Nonetheless, it's an age-old and eternally delicate social problem with a lively history.

"Eons ago, men viewed bad breath as a female problem. If it led to infidelity, they'd blame their wives, claiming it was their sign of virility and masculinity. Back then, it was grounds for divorce," says dental hygienist and educator Anne Bosy, an international leader in the science of bad breath, with an MSc. and a thriving practice at Toronto's



— Photos by Ken Kerr, SUN; models from Ice Modelling Agency; photo manipulation by Joe Duffy

Fresh Breath Clinic, the first of its kind in North America.

Until now, little could be done to effectively treat chronic bad breath. Its emotional backlash was profoundly felt by at least 25%

of the population, says Dr. Julian Geller, a pediatric dentist and co-founder of the Fresh Breath Clinic.

"I've seen marriages break up over (chronic) bad breath," Bosy says. "I've seen

young people quit school because they felt they couldn't compete. I've seen adults passed up for job promotions or not apply for them at all because they're so self-conscious about their breath. I've known people who remain single and not even attempt to socialize. I've known people to make every excuse in the book to cover up for their bad breath. They're a damaged population."

Everybody gets bad breath from time to time. Like body odor, it's part of the human condition. However, within the context of interpersonal relationships, it can cause problems.

"By calling malodor or halitosis 'bad breath', you immediately place a value judgment on it culturally and socially," says Larry Nisan, director of Toronto's Psychotherapy Institute.

"We ascribe clean breath to a clean person, and believe that cleanliness is next to Godliness. That's a moral judgment. Then what is bad breath? It connotes dirtiness. And what does it say about the individual with bad breath? That he or she is dirty. So, you can see, with these levels of twisted logic, how it became bad to have bad breath."

Matter of respect

What can result, Nisan explains, are issues around respect, which can lead to power struggles between two people.

"Like, 'if you won't take a shower before we make love. What does this say about how much you respect me,' which could lead to my believing, 'You won't do this for me.'"

"But it's a mistaken idea that one cleans one's (chronic bad) breath like one cleans one's body," says Nisan. "It's like saying, if you love me, you'll clean up your psoriasis."

Knowing you have bad breath is the key to averting or solving these problems. But how do you tell the one you love that she or he has bad breath? "In a good relationship, the door is open to intimacy and there should be openness without fear of judgment," says Nisan. "You could say, 'Let's go ask our doctor about this', the same way you might handle any other intimate medical problem. Deal with it as a couple."

Less intimate relationships are trickier. Ask yourself if the bad breath is a real problem. If it is, try sensitively sharing information from the Fresh Breath Clinic pamphlet. The clinic can be reached at 416-324-8675.

"It's a miracle," says Winters, three weeks after starting her treatment there. "I feel free to talk to anyone, be as close as I want to, and my husband and I are kissing again."