

# Soft Bristles

I went to the dentist recently and got scolded for trying too hard.

---

Chris Wyatt • July 5, 2026 • 7 min read

---

I had been brushing twice a day, diligently, vigorously, with the kind of pressure that says I take this seriously. And the hygienist looked at my gums, which are retreating up my teeth like a hairline with regrets, and told me the problem was the effort itself. Brush softer, she said. Use gentler bristles. You'll get more off.

This was offensive on its face. Everything I know about scrubbing says otherwise. Burnt pan? Scrub harder. Grout? Harder. Effort and results have been correlated in my head since childhood, and now a woman with a small mirror was telling me the correlation runs backwards inside my own mouth.

I drove home annoyed, and somewhere on the way the annoyance turned into the uncomfortable recognition that she had not really been talking about teeth. Or rather, she had, but I had heard a diagnosis of considerably wider application. Because the mistake I was making with a toothbrush is the same mistake I have made with people, with sleep, with work, and possibly with everything I have ever wanted badly. It is not a lesson about moderation. Moderation is boring and mostly wrong. It is a lesson about mechanics, and the mechanics are worth understanding precisely, because they explain an enormous amount of life.

---

## The physics of missing the point

Start with what is actually happening in the mouth, because the mouth is where the mechanism is visible.

The plaque that matters lives in the gingival sulcus, the shallow crevice where the tooth disappears under the gum. It is a hiding spot roughly a millimeter deep, and the only thing that can clean it is the tip of a bristle, slipped in at an angle, moving gently.

Now watch what pressure does. Press hard and the bristles do not penetrate more forcefully. They splay. They bend flat against the tooth and skate across the surface like a crowd pushed against a doorway, everyone flattened, no one getting through. The research on this is almost comically clean: past a modest threshold of force, plaque removal stops improving entirely, while abrasion keeps climbing. The extra effort buys zero additional cleaning and positive additional damage. You are paying full price for harm.

And the target responds. Gums recede under sustained assault. The crevice you were trying to clean pulls away, exposing root surfaces that were never built for the open air. The world's most literal metaphor: push too hard on a sensitive boundary and the boundary retreats, leaving something raw where it used to be.

So I had been failing twice, and here is the elegant cruelty of it: I failed while feeling thorough. The sensation of vigorous effort, the scrubbing, the mild burn, the visible exertion, was precisely the thing misleading me. Effort is the body's receipt for virtue. It is also, in this case, a receipt for a purchase that was never made.

---

## Crevices everywhere

Once you see the mechanism, the tooth stops being about teeth, because a life is full of gingival sulci. Full of targets that are not surfaces but crevices, and

crevices share a property: they only admit instruments that have not been deformed by the force behind them.

Sleep is a crevice. Try to fall asleep, really bear down on it, and you will be composing this grievance at 3 a.m. The effort of pursuing sleep is the exact thing that splays the bristles.

Trust is a crevice. Interrogate someone and they seal shut. Press a sale and the prospect's psychology does exactly what gum tissue does: it recedes, and psychologists have a name for the exposed nerve it leaves behind. They call it reactance, the reflexive no that arrives before the merits are even considered, purely because pressure was detected.

A golf swing is a crevice. Grip tighter and the clubhead slows, because the small muscles you have now recruited into rigidity were the ones responsible for speed. Every golf instructor on earth is a dental hygienist with worse job security.

Even the machines have joined the pattern. Anyone who works seriously with AI agents learns this within a month: the instinct to control harder, to write the four-thousand-word prompt that anticipates every failure, that grips the model by the collar, produces worse output than a clear objective and room to move. Splayed bristles, silicon edition. Force deforms the instrument, and it turns out the instrument does not need to be alive for that to be true.

---

## The objection that makes the case

Here is where this kind of essay is supposed to go soft, so let us not. There is an obvious rebuttal and it deserves the floor: plenty of things genuinely require maximum force. Deadlifts. Fire doors. Contract negotiations with someone acting in bad faith. Startups, famously, do not reward gentle effort. A philosophy of universal softness is just laziness wearing linen.

Correct. All of it. And the objection does not weaken the thesis; it completes it, because it reveals what the thesis actually is. The claim was never that gentleness beats force. The claim is that the world contains two kinds of

targets. Surfaces yield to force: the burnt pan, the barbell, the door. Crevices yield only to precision: the sulcus, the insomniac's mind, the wary customer, the swing. Force applied to a surface is competence. Force applied to a crevice is a man scrubbing his gums off while feeling responsible.

The real skill, the one nobody teaches, is diagnosis. Not "how hard should I push" but "what kind of target is this." Most failures of effort are not failures of quantity. They are category errors. Someone brought a surface strategy to a crevice problem, and the harder they worked, the more the target closed.

---

## Where the effort actually goes

One more correction, because "be gentle" is still not the lesson, and anyone who leaves with that phrase has been robbed. Ask the hygienist what proper brushing involves. A specific angle, forty-five degrees into the gum line. Small circular motions. Systematic coverage, every surface, two full minutes. Gentle brushing is not less effort. It is effort evicted from your forearm and relocated to your attention. The pressure goes down; the precision, the patience, the aim all go up. It is harder, not easier. It just doesn't feel like trying, which is exactly why we undervalue it. We have confused the sensation of strain with the presence of work.

This is where the whole thing opens up into art, because art is the discipline built entirely on relocated effort. Debussy, who understood crevices better than most periodontists, built a career on withdrawn force: the chord left unresolved, the phrase that dissolves instead of concluding, the silence doing labor that fortissimo never could. It would be wrong to call that restraint, as if he were holding something back. Nothing was held back. The effort was total; it had simply been moved from volume to placement. The unplayed note costs more than the played one. You have to know exactly where it goes.

A comedian's pause works the same way. So does the negotiator's silence, the one that makes the other side fill the air with concessions. So does whatever your most perceptive friend does when you are upset, which is conspicuously not pressing.

---

## The receipt

So the hygienist was handing me more than dental advice, though the dental advice alone was worth taking, given that gums do not grow back. She was handing me a diagnostic for everything downstream of the sink: when sustained effort keeps producing damage instead of results, stop asking whether you are trying hard enough. Ask whether you are facing a crevice, and whether the trying itself, the pressure you were so proud of, is what splayed the instrument and sealed the target.

Some things in this life are surfaces. Push on those. But the good stuff, the plaque that actually rots you, the trust, the sleep, the swing, the phrase of music that makes a stranger stop walking, all of it lives in the crevices. And crevices have one house rule, posted at the entrance, a millimeter deep and non-negotiable: nothing gets in that arrived under pressure.



---

**Chris Wyatt**

Published July 2026. Off the clock.

[chriswyatt.dev/insights/soft-bristles](https://chriswyatt.dev/insights/soft-bristles)

Some things are surfaces. The good things are crevices.