When You’re Smiling

Sandra K. Tunajek, CRNA, DNP

Smiling is one of the common things we do. Every person smiles several times a day, sometimes even without realizing. Although the way in which different smiles are formed remains unclear, experts do agree that there are many kinds of smiles. Each time someone smiles, different parts of the face change, depending on the reason for the smile.

Each person smiles and laughs in a unique manner. When we smile to greet someone we know or wish to know, our eyebrows are raised. When we smile because we are embarrassed, our chin is placed in a lower position. We also smile when we are ironic, a type of smile in which the mouth curves differently than expected. And, there is that teeny-tiny, personal, private smile called the inner smile, reflective and mysterious.

Scientists have found that the genuine smile, known as Duchenne smile, indicates real happiness or amusement. The Duchenne smile involves both voluntary and involuntary contraction from two muscles: the zygomatic major (raising the corners of the mouth) and the orbicularis oculi (raising the cheeks and producing crow’s feet around the eyes). A fake smile or, the posed, “say cheese” smile, involves the contraction of only the zygomatic major muscle. Individuals cannot voluntarily contract the orbicularis oculi muscle.1, 2

Other studies have discovered that these two types of smiles are actually controlled by two completely different parts of our brain. Thus, the posed smile is controlled by the motor cortex while emotion-related movements, like the Duchenne smile, is controlled by the limbic system (the emotional center of the brain). And, even though a heart-felt smile has a deeper effect, even a surface smile can trick the brain into releasing happy hormones according to biofeedback research.3, 4

During a smile, teeth can be shown or not; jaws are together, and the voice not heard. The grin, a type of smile, has mischievous hidden connotations. A person usually grins when wanting something from another person, but does not want to come right out and say it. It can also be a display of power or control over another. One would also grin when playing a joke on someone else, and waiting for him to fall for it.

What Does Your Smile Really Mean?
Science believes smiling and laughter are not about humor, but rather about relationships between people. The emerging field of gelotology, the study of laughter and its effects on the body from a psychological and physiological perspective, has shown that smiling is really one of the oldest and simplest techniques of effective communication.

A smile means the same thing in all cultures. Research has shown that when two people in conversation use the same kind of body movements and gestures, such as smiling, they will experience greater empathy for each other, which they may not even consciously notice. If we smile frequently we will be perceived as more likable, friendly, warm, and approachable.3, 5

Mother Theresa believed peace begins with a smile and that a sincere smile shines from the soul making the world a warmer place. A real smile is one of the most effective means to capture the trust, attention, and rapport of an audience. It is an essential part of meeting people.

It has added benefits as a stress reducer. Studies have shown that smiling releases endorphins, natural pain killers, and serotonin. Smiling helps the immune system to work better. When you smile there is a measurable reduction in your blood pressure. Together these make us feel good and help produce a feeling of well-being and composition.6

A smile can not only make you look more cheerful and positive, it can transform a person’s face. A smile is an inexpensive way to change your looks. It can even make somebody plain quite simply beautiful. Smiling naturally exercises and draws up the smiling muscles. It can fill out sagging, lined, wrinkly skin—that alone gives us a very good reason to smile more as we get older.6

The smile on a warm, friendly face appearing amongst a group of lonely people in a nursing home, for instance, can bring a light into sad, lifeless eyes. The smile of a baby or child is particularly delightful, irresistible, and contagious. Researchers also claim that smiling and looking like we are happy will indeed make us happier.3, 4

Most often smiling is an expression of delight, pleasure, happiness or love. Research shows that smiling leads to certain physiological changes in the brain, actually cooling the blood in the face, which in turn gives a feeling of happiness. The basic act of smiling elevates mood, while scowling decreases happiness. Smiling releases more serotonin, the so-called ‘happy chemical’ in the brain. So, even a smile that starts out fake, could lead to genuine happiness.3

In recent years, there has been increased interest in why people are happy. There are common characteristics shared by people who say they are happy, including good health, a feeling of autonomy, and social connectiveness. Much of the literature focuses on maintaining a positive attitude, which is often reflected in smiles. In an interesting...
study, researchers rated the smiles of women in their college yearbook pictures, and found that authentic smiles predicted favorable marriage outcomes and personal well-being up to 30 years later.  

The mysteriousness of a smile is exemplified by the most famous smile of all time. Found in a small masterpiece painting by Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), a portrait of a young Florentine woman known as Mona Lisa. There has been endless debate as to whether she is actually smiling. Some experts believe it may be the subtle shadows and light that trick the visual perceptions of the viewer or it is that her face does not match the viewer’s unconscious template for a person either smiling or not smiling. Only the right side of her face appears to smile. Because the different parts of her face are sending different language messages, her smile creates a mysterious quality.

The Benefits of a Smile

Since the dawn of man, smiles have had a calming effect. We do not have to be of same culture or speak same language to know that a smile is a sign of peace and possible friendship. Studies confirm what healthcare professionals know, an injured person and their families are set at ease with a smile.

Smiling is something people can do sitting down, costs no money, and requires no special exercise equipment or skill. Perhaps, the next time we feel stressed and need a wellness break we should take a smile time-out. If we take a deep breath, smile, exhale, and say “Aah” while visualizing all our muscles and cells smiling, and maybe add a memory of a time that we felt really good, we will smile, laugh, and de-stress a bit. Remember, even when we fake a smile or laugh, we get the same physiological benefits as when it’s the real thing.

The easiest way to a fantastic, genuine smile is to be happy. Most happiness researchers agree that being surrounded by friends and family is one of the most crucial reasons of our well-being. When we think about someone we care about, something that we genuinely love to do, or a joke that is hilarious, we smile. When we think about the happiest moments in our lives, we smile and feel grateful for all that we have, it is much easier to produce friendly, easygoing, genuine smiles.

Smiles are Meant to Give Away

A smile is a chain reaction, a facial expression that is contagious and is often passed on from one person to another, with potential to travel many miles in the course of a day. There is much negativity, sadness, sorrow, and despair in the world today, and while all the problems cannot be overcome just by smiling, smiles can make a big difference. Before we know it, our own hearts will be warmer, and so will many others. A smile is free. A smile cannot be bought, begged, borrowed, or stolen, for it is something that is of little value to anyone until it is given away.

References


When you’re smiling the whole world smiles with you.

Louis Armstrong