

Smiling at People While You Wear a Mask Can Be Good For You

¹ It felt weird for many of us to put on a mask for the first time at the start of the pandemic. Our first thoughts were probably wondering how we looked and what other people would think when they saw us. But even as wearing masks started to feel normal, some of us still weren't sure what to do with our mouths behind the masks or whether we should look at other people around us who were wearing ones. If nobody can see the expression on our mouths, is it silly to smile at someone? Researchers say: No, it's not silly. In fact, a smile, even if it is unseen, can have a positive effect on our emotions and on those people we are smiling at.

² According to psychology lecturer, Alex Sel, when we smile while looking at someone, we tend to have more positive feelings about that other person's facial expressions. In other words, we're apt think that person seems like a kind, honest or pleasant person. Sel conducted a study in which subjects were shown a set of pictures of people who had neutral expressions on their faces, in other words, not smiling or frowning. He used electrodes to measure the brain activity of the subjects as they were looking at the pictures. Some of the subjects were told to smile while looking at the pictures, and others were told to keep a neutral expression. From the brain activity of the subjects, Sel discovered that the ones who were smiling were more likely to have a positive reaction to faces in the pictures. Sel concluded that it's a good idea for us to smile behind our masks because if we don't, there is a good chance that we will perceive the people around us as less happy and friendly.

³ Furthermore, smiling can have a positive effect on our attitude. In an experiment, subjects were told to hold a pen between their teeth while looking at some cartoons. For half the subjects, they were instructed to hold the pen in a position that would cause

them to smile and the other half to place the pen in a way that would keep them from smiling. The researchers found that the ones who smiled rated the cartoons that they were shown as funnier. In other words, just by smiling, the subjects increased their enjoyment.

⁴ Because of the reduced opportunities to socialize with others these days, it's easy for people to feel disconnect with others. One easy way to change this is through eye-contact, whether or not we smile behind our masks.

⁵ To study the effects of eye-contact, researchers set up an experiment with three conditions. In the first condition, as strangers passed by the experimenter, the experimenter gave the strangers neutral eye-contact. In other words, the experimenter didn't smile or frown. In the second condition, the experimenter gave the strangers eye contact plus a smile. But in the third condition, the experimenter gave just a quick glance in the direction of the stranger but not at their eyes.

⁶ A research assistant followed the strangers for a minute, approached them and then asked them, "Within the last minute, how disconnected do you feel from others?" The results showed that the third group felt more disconnected than the other two groups. Interestingly, they indicated that they felt disconnected not only from the stranger (researcher) who had just glanced in their direction but also from people in general. In sum, if we make eye contact with others, we can actually make them feel more connected with others and perhaps less isolated.

⁷ Life behind masks can be good. It's actually not that hard to follow some simple techniques to help us feel positive and give some comfort to those around us.

Exercise: Write T (true) or F (false) in the blanks.

- ___ 1. Many people started wearing masks because they were fashionable.
- ___ 2. Researchers tell us that smiling while wearing a mask can have good results.
- ___ 3. According to the article, if we smile at someone, they will think that we are happy.
- ___ 4. In paragraph 4, the subjects told the researchers their opinions of the people in the pictures.
- ___ 5. According to the article, if we don't smile behind our mask, we might think that people around us are unfriendly.
- ___ 6. According to paragraph 3, if we have a smile on our face, people will think that we are strange.
- ___ 7. According to the study in paragraph 5, if we make eye-contact with someone as we walk past them, we can help them feel less isolated.

Answer Key

1. F
2. T
3. F
4. F
5. T
6. F
7. T

If, like me, you've been reluctant to "waste" a masked smile, you should return to smiling as usual. It turns out, humans are really good at reading eyes. "When you encounter someone, if you're acknowledging them as a human being," Shiota says, you tend to look them in the eyes and they "will see that smiling in the eyes."

According to research, we respond "instinctively" to eye contact, Shiota says. The results of an Evolution and Human Behavior study, in which analysis of people's gaze during a shared meal followed certain patterns, suggest that our eyes evolved to facilitate nonverbal communication. Another study found that oxytocin, also known as "the love hormone," increases the amount of time people gaze at the eye region of the face.

But if you've never been one to smile (or smize), there's no need to start now. Gillian Sandstrom, senior psychology lecturer at the University of Essex, says mere eye contact can enhance people's well-being. She cites a Psychological Science study that examined the effect of receiving eye contact from a stranger. In some cases, eye contact included a smile, while in others it did not. Regardless of whether a stranger smiled at them, people reported feeling less disconnected after engaging in eye contact.

A nod, a wave or a "hello" can also create connection, de Gelder says. But, she says it's harder to spontaneously engage in friendly gestures without a smile. She explains that the face, voice and body normally "hang together." In other words, you're naturally inclined to wave enthusiastically if you're already smiling. On the other hand, if your expression is neutral, it takes more conscious effort to ramp up your body language.

So smile behind your mask as you wave hello. Not only is your obscured smile still discernible, but it will also help you find the energy for the nod or the wave or the hello that will seal the sentiment.

Masks shouldn't keep us from doing "all of the things that you might normally do to acknowledge another person's humanity when you encounter them," Shiota says. In light of her advice, I

In 2012, Purdue University psychologist Eric Wesselmann and some colleagues devised an experiment to study what it does to people when their glance isn't returned — the non-verbal equivalent of a failed high five. Researchers fanned out across the Purdue campus, in Lafayette, Indiana. They chose random strangers, whom they lumped into three experimental

conditions. One group received neutral eye contact from a passing experimenter. A second group got eye contact plus a smile. But the third group received the booby prize: The experimenter, as she passed, sent a glance that just missed, as if she were looking not at them but kind of *through* them.

A research assistant chased down the strangers in that last group. "Within the last minute," they were asked, "how disconnected do you feel from others?" They reported they felt more disconnected than the subjects in the other groups. Not just disconnected from the stranger who had *ghosted* them, but from *humanity in general*. When you withhold eye contact, it turns out, you deliver a little icy sliver of existential loneliness into the heart of a stranger.

It turns out that countries with lots of immigration have historically relied more on nonverbal communication. Thus, people there might smile more.

For a study published in 2015, an international group of researchers looked at the number of "source countries" that have fed into various nations since the year 1500. Places like Canada and the United States are very diverse, with 63 and 83 source countries, respectively, while countries like China and Zimbabwe are fairly homogenous, with just a few nationalities represented in their populations.

After polling people from 32 countries to learn how much they felt various feelings should be expressed openly, the authors found that emotional expressiveness was correlated with diversity. In other words, when there are a lot of immigrants around, you might have to smile more to build trust and cooperation, since you don't all speak the same language.

People in the more diverse countries also smiled for a different reason than the people in the more homogeneous nations. In the countries with more immigrants, people smiled in order to bond socially. Compared to the less-diverse nations, they were more likely to say smiles were a sign someone "wants to be a close friend of yours." But in the countries that are more uniform, people were more likely to smile to show they were superior to one another. That might be, the authors speculate, because countries without significant influxes of outsiders tend to be more hierarchical, and nonverbal communication helps maintain these delicate power structures.

So Americans smile a lot because our Swedish forefathers wanted to befriend their Italian neighbors, but they couldn't figure out how to pronounce *buongiorno*. Seems plausible. But there's also something very *w i d e* about the classic American grin. Why is it that Americans smile with such fervor?

[Washington Post importance of smiling even behind masks](#)

By Pam Moore
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Before the coronavirus pandemic, I always smiled at other runners as we crossed paths. Now that we're wearing masks, I rarely bother. And when I do, I have no idea whether the intended recipient even notices.

I never gave much thought to the momentary connections created by exchanging smiles with a stranger before the pandemic. Now I miss them, leading me to wonder: Does it matter whether I offer an unseen smile to someone I don't know?

The short answer: Yes, because it can affect your emotions as well as theirs. Here are the reasons you should continue smiling behind your mask.

This sense of connection supports our well-being, whether we realize it or not. Michelle "Lani" Shiota, associate professor of psychology at Arizona State University, explains: "When we're smiling and engaging with other people, it's the engagement with other people that makes us feel better," adding, "it turns out that that's even the case if you're introverted." She was referring to the work of psychology researcher Luke Smillie, including a 2019 Journal of Experimental Psychology study and a 2017 Emotion study, which found that people — including introverts — tended to experience better moods when acting like extroverts.

Shiota says smiling can convey much more than happiness or pleasure. She cites a 2018 PLOS One study that found that living in a geographical area with a high level of ancestral diversity and a history of cultural heterogeneity was a predictor of smiling. According to Shiota, this data suggests we smile to signal that we're "safe." Smiles, she says, are "this big kind of obvious way that we say, 'Not a threat!'"

But don't fake it till you make it

Although smiling conveys important social cues, it may not affect our emotional state as strongly as the psychology community was led to believe by a widely cited 1988 study.

The findings, however, are now considered controversial within the psychology community, say both Sel and Shiota, because the results have not been widely replicated. Furthermore, a 2019 Psychological Bulletin meta-analysis found that the overall impact of facial feedback on mood, though significant, was small.

A 2019 study in the Journal of Occupational Health Psychology actually found a strong relationship between insincere smiling and heavy drinking. Researchers looked at workers whose jobs required significant emotional labor, which was defined as "effortfully amplifying, faking, and suppressing emotional expressions," or "surface acting," were more likely to engage in heavy drinking and drinking after work.

The eyes truly are the window to the soul

Sketching my way through crisis: Music to keep you inspired in dark times

Still not convinced your "Before Times" smile speaks for itself behind a face covering? Try "smizing." This term, coined by Tyra Banks, refers to smiling with your eyes. Shiota says

psychology researcher Paul Ekman originally theorized the Duchenne smile, which shows both in your mouth and eyes, was the only genuine type of smile. Though that theory has since been moderated — Shiota says milder smiles can also be genuine — **the more intense your smile, the more likely your eyes are to crinkle at the corners. Enter the smize. To do it, gently squint your eyes while relaxing the rest of your face.** (Banks offers a tutorial here.)

Body language matters

A smile can speak volumes — but so can body language. This is especially relevant for people with autism, for whom masks create a significant barrier to reading other people's expressions, and for people with hearing impairments who rely on lip-reading, Sel says.

Masks shouldn't keep us from doing "all of the things that you might normally do to acknowledge another person's humanity when you encounter them," Shiota says. In light of her advice, I've started nodding and smiling at fellow runners as we pass. It could be the endorphins, but I swear I feel better.

[feeling connected by eye contact](#)

[Smile heterogeneous Atlantic](#)

Why Americans Smile So Much

How immigration and cultural values affect what people do with their faces

OLGA KHAZAN

MAY 3, 2017

On Reddit forums that ask "What's a dead giveaway that someone is American?" one trait comes up over and over again: big, toothy grins.

Here's how one Reddit user in Finland put it:

When a stranger on the street smiles at you:

- a. you assume he is drunk
- b. he is insane
- c. he's an American

Last year, I wrote about why some countries seem to smile less than average—and mistrust those who do seem unusually peppy. A country's level of instability, that study found, might be why people who seem happy for no reason in, say, Russia, are considered foolish.

But there's an interesting line of research that helps explain outliers on the other end of the spectrum, too: Americans and their stereotypically mega-watt smiles.

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For a study published in 2015, an international group of researchers looked at the number of “source countries” that have fed into various nations since the year 1500. Places like Canada and the United States are very diverse, with 63 and 83 source countries, respectively, while countries like China and Zimbabwe are fairly homogenous, with just a few nationalities represented in their populations.

After polling people from 32 countries to learn how much they felt various feelings should be expressed openly, the authors found that emotional expressiveness was correlated with diversity. In other words, when there are a lot of immigrants around, you might have to smile more to build trust and cooperation, since you don’t all speak the same language.

People in the more diverse countries also smiled for a different reason than the people in the more homogeneous nations. In the countries with more immigrants, people smiled in order to bond socially. Compared to the less-diverse nations, they were more likely to say smiles were a sign someone “wants to be a close friend of yours.” But in the countries that are more uniform, people were more likely to smile to show they were superior to one another. That might be, the authors speculate, because countries without significant influxes of outsiders tend to be more hierarchical, and nonverbal communication helps maintain these delicate power structures.

So Americans smile a lot because our Swedish forefathers wanted to befriend their Italian neighbors, but they couldn’t figure out how to pronounce *buongiorno*. Seems plausible. But there’s also something very wide about the classic American grin. Why is it that Americans smile with such fervor?

Example of an “excited” smile. (Emotion)

This could be because Americans value high-energy, happy feelings more than some other countries. For a study published last year, researchers compared the official photos of American and Chinese business and government leaders. After coding them according to their levels of “facial muscle movement,” they found that American leaders in all contexts were both more likely to smile and showed more “excited” smiles than the Chinese leaders did.

Later, they asked college students from 10 different countries how often they would ideally like to experience certain emotions—from happiness to calmness to hostility—in a given week.

Then, they looked at photos of legislators from those 10 countries. They found that the more a country’s college students valued happy, high-energy emotions, like excitement and enthusiasm, the more excited-looking the government officials looked in their photos. (The correlation held after controlling for economic indicators like GDP.) Interestingly, the amount that people in those countries actually felt happy didn’t matter. The leaders’ excitement appeared to reflect the ideal emotional states of their constituents, not their actual ones.

Proportion of excited smiles in photos (y-axis) and the students’ valuing of excitement as an emotion (x-axis). (Emotion)

Other than causing consternation for tourists, these cultural differences in the value and uses of smiles are also why it can be hard for iconic American companies to expand overseas. As a recent episode of *Invisibilia* showed, when McDonald’s entered Russia in the ’90s, they had to

coach their employees on how to smile. Here's how Yuri Chekalin, a former McDonald's employee, described the experience to Invisibilia host Alix Spiegel:

CHEKALIN: It was an American video, and it was just dubbed in Russian. How you're supposed to smile, how you're supposed to greet.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: Glad you came in, hope to see you again real soon.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN: You bet.

SPIEGEL: And then the lights came back on, and the trainers got down to work breaking down the elements of American cheerfulness into digestible component parts. For example, when you meet someone, you must make direct eye contact, which seemed deeply strange to Yuri.

CHEKALIN: So in Russia we used to—if somebody looks at us, we just kind of look the other way, unless we about to fight or something like that. But in America, he says, you know, when you making eye contact, you smile.

And when Wal-Mart opened stores in Germany, the company also had to tweak its chipper ways to better suit the sober local mores, as The New York Times reported in 2006:

Wal-Mart stopped requiring sales clerks to smile at customers—a practice that some male shoppers interpreted as flirting—and scrapped the morning Wal-Mart chant by staff members.

“People found these things strange; Germans just don't behave that way,” said Hans-Martin Poschmann, the secretary of the Verdi union, which represents 5,000 Wal-Mart employees here.

It wasn't enough, alas: Wal-Mart pulled out of Germany that year after losing hundreds of millions of dollars. There were other cultural differences at play, like Wal-Mart's failed attempts to get its German employees to relocate. And while the bosses back at Wal-Mart's Bentonville, Arkansas, headquarters might have been cheerier than their Bavarian counterparts, they weren't too happy with unions, a staple of the German labor market. (“Bentonville ... thought we were communists,” Poschmann, the union secretary, told the Times.)

Like so many other daily practices, in other words, the American smile is a product of our culture. And it can be similarly difficult to export

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