



The Power of a Smile

A Report by Ann Demarais, PhD, for the Get It Right! campaign



You meet someone at a party and he smiles broadly and spontaneously. You feel an instant sense of happiness and comfort. In just a fraction of a second, your mood is uplifted. You feel warmly about this person, and imagine that he is sincere, fun to be around, intelligent and interesting.

How did this happen? How did this person make you feel so good without a single word? It was his “smile power” that elicited that host of positive feelings. You too have the power to elicit such positive feelings in others – and in yourself – just by smiling!

This report is a primer on smile power. It will outline what a smile is, where it comes from and the research findings that demonstrate the personal and social benefits of smiling. It outlines what a smile is, where it comes from and the research findings that demonstrate the personal and social benefits of smiling. It also provides tips on how to exude smile confidence and maximize your smile power.



The Origin of a Smile

While a smile can mean many things to different people, Merriam-Webster defines a smile as:

1. A facial expression in which the eyes brighten and the corners of the mouth curve upward and which expresses especially amusement, pleasure or approval
2. A pleasant or encouraging appearance

So how do people come to equate feelings of pleasure with engaging facial muscles? It's actually part of human nature. Starting at the tender age of one month, babies smile. It's an instinctual way of expressing feelings of pleasure and safety. Developmental psychologist Neil Salkind of the University of Kansas has shown that infant smiles are a process of feeling and expressing pleasure. He videotaped infants' facial expressions in a variety of settings and observed that smiles tend to occur in response to situations of positive emotion, such as playing peek-a-boo games. Additionally, researcher L. Alan Sroufe at the University of Minnesota demonstrated that smiling can also be a response to tension relief; it's linked to a decrease in heart rate when an infant interprets an event as being safe, familiar and interesting.

While it's an instinct, babies also learn how to use smiles to their benefit. It's the foundation of social competence. Babies quickly learn that lifting their facial muscles attracts others, creating a more positive world around them. Their smiles are mirrored by their parents, thus making it more likely that the infant will smile even more in return. Babies channel this smile instinct as they grow older. As children, they smile spontaneously when they are playing with other children, fostering connections and friendships.

Then they enter the awkward teenage period. Adolescents, often self-conscious about their looks, may override their instinct and not smile as readily as they did in their younger years, especially if they have any concerns about the appearance of their teeth. Fortunately, this period does not last, and they eventually find their adult ease. However, many people still carry some residual inhibitions from their self-conscious days. Some people may still not like the look of their teeth. Without confidence in their smile, they may hold back from showing their teeth, or even smiling at all, without realizing the effect this may be having on how others perceive them, or how they feel about themselves.

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Benefits of Smiling

Babies quickly discover the positive effects of smiling, and as adults, the benefits are even greater – both for the individual and for everyone around them. The following summarizes key research that highlights the benefits of a smile:

Smiling is good for mental health. Smiling is a natural mood enhancer. People smile when they are happy, but it works the other way too. Psychologists Paul Ekman from University of California at San Francisco and Richard Davidson from the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that people feel happier just by voluntarily moving their facial muscles to form the shape of a smile. They measured brain electrical activity in research participants as they made voluntary smiles, and found that they generated the same pattern of brain activity as when they experienced spontaneous positive feelings. Additionally, a research team from the University of Mannheim, Germany demonstrated that jokes seem funnier when people put their mouth in the shape of a smile. They had participants either put a pen in their mouth horizontally to form a smile, or in their lips to form a frown, and then had them read comics. Participants reported more intense humor responses when they had their mouth in the shape of a smile.

Smiling makes people likeable. People who smile at others are perceived better than if they present a neutral expression. In one experiment, researchers Chris Kleinke and Christy Taylor of the University of Alaska asked participants to speak about themselves – their hobbies, interests, goals and preferences – while others listened silently. The listeners were instructed to either smile during each topic, or not. Later they asked the speaker to report how much they liked the silent listeners. The participants reported that they liked the smiling observers significantly more than those who presented a neutral face.

Smiling makes people more memorable. A facial expression impacts whether people are remembered, and they make the most memorable

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first impression if they are smiling. In one experiment conducted at the University of California, Berkeley, researchers showed pictures of people displaying a variety of facial expressions including happiness (smiling), anger, fear or surprise. Later the viewers were shown the pictures and asked whether they had seen the person previously. People who were smiling were remembered better than people pictured in any of the other expressions.

Smiling is good for social lives. It's a fact – smiling makes people appear better looking and more socially appealing. Psychologist Harry Reis and colleagues at the University of Rochester had people rate photos of others smiling and in a neutral pose. People were seen as significantly more attractive when they smiled, and perceived to be more sincere, sociable and competent. In addition, psychologist Sing Lau at Hong Kong Baptist University conducted an experiment where participants looked at randomized photos of smiling or non-smiling faces (of the same subjects) and were asked to evaluate them on a number of personality dimensions. The results showed the people were more attracted to the smiling version, and assumed the person was more intelligent when smiling, compared to the non-smiling version. Further, they found that the smiling faces generate a warm feeling in them, compared to the neutral counterpart.

Smiling has a positive impact on others. While gestures can mean different things in different cultures, a smile is a universal and readily understood gesture of friendliness. A smiling face lifts others' moods and has a primitive contagious effect. When someone smiles, others are more likely to smile too. It pays dividends to others around them, even strangers, and impacts their behavior in positive ways. In one experiment, researchers Nicolas Guéguen and Marie-Agnes de Gail from the University of Bretagne-Sud had a person either smile or display a neutral face to a passerby. Later the passerby had the opportunity to help a person who had dropped something. The smiled-upon person was much more likely to stop and help.



Maximizing Your Smile Power

Now that you know some of the many benefits of smiling, you may be inspired to smile more readily and reap all the social benefits. But it may take a little effort. Here are some tips to help you maximize your smile power.

1. **Ask for feedback.** Ask a trusted friend for feedback on your smile. Do you smile more or less than others? We don't always see ourselves as others do and feedback is a great way to gain self-awareness.

For example, when buying coffee in the morning, greeting the receptionist at work, or just passing by people. Try it for a day and see the positive effect on others – and yourself.
2. **Be socially generous.** Now that you know you have the smile power to make others feel good about themselves, offer your smile as a “social gift.” Your smile tells others that you are happy to be in their presence. It puts them at ease; it's affirming and connecting.
3. **Create a great first impression.** When making a first impression on a date, an interview, or in meeting a potential client, greet people with a broad smile, even if it is not your habit. It creates the foundation for a positive first interaction, and a positive relationship. It can transform strangers into friends, romantic partners, employers and clients.
4. **Practice makes perfect.** With a little practice, you can relearn the habit of smiling readily and unselfconsciously. As an exercise, make an extra effort to smile at others, say five times a day.
5. **Maintain proper dental hygiene.** Healthy teeth are the foundation of a healthy smile. While we all have busy lives, it's important to brush and floss daily. And see your dental professional every six months.
6. **Get a smile makeover.** Teeth naturally lose their luster over time; coffee, red wine, blueberries and many everyday foods add sallow. There are a lot of things we can't change about our appearance, but having whiter and brighter teeth is something that is easy to do – and can have a tremendous impact. When your teeth look good, you feel good and are likely to smile more readily. If you are considering whitening your teeth, get it right and speak to a dental professional who will be able to recommend an option that is right for you. While there are many options, be sure to choose a well-known brand that is safe and will give you the best results.

Conclusion

A smile is a human instinct. At an early age, people discover how to use their smile to express emotion and create a positive environment around them. Its power allows people to connect with others and form positive relationships. While self-conscious inhibitions and concerns about the look of teeth may override the instinct, the benefits are too great to ignore and it is important to take steps to ensure smiling is part of everyday life. Use the tips in this report to maximize your smile power, and as a first step, just go ahead – SMILE!



Ann Demarais, PhD has more than 15 years of experience in applied psychology, specializing in interpersonal communication, impression management, social skills, leadership and executive coaching. She has coached hundreds of individuals on how to be successful in social and business situations.

Dr. Demarais is the author of First Impressions: What you don't know about how others see you, published by Random House and translated into 24 languages. She has also been featured in scores of media venues.

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