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THE SCIENCE OF **SMILING**



THE MONA LISA SMIRK. THE TYRA BANKS SMIZE. THE "SAY CHEESE" GRIN. ONE FACIAL EXPRESSION, COUNTLESS SUBLIMINAL MESSAGES. **LOREN SAVINI** EXPLORES THE EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL POWER OF THE HUMAN SMILE.

"A SMILE CAN IMPROVE AND REPAIR RELATIONSHIPS OR EASE CONFLICT. IT'S A WAY OF SAYING TO THE OTHER PERSON THAT YOU CAN BE TRUSTED."

Resting bitch face—that stern, stony-mouthed phenomenon—peaked culturally around three years ago. Scientists acknowledged its existence, think pieces in *The New York Times* followed, and memes circulated with the claim: “Smiling Gives You Wrinkles. Resting Bitch Face Keeps You Pretty.” The latter bit is ironic, considering that the majority of research up to that point suggested that smiling makes a person look three years younger. But now the smile seems to be having a resurgence. A raft of new research points to its potential benefits: lower stress levels and heart rates, increased immunity, even exercise sessions that seem less strenuous. And dermatologists agree that everyone needs to take a fistful of chill pills over eliminating their smile lines, aka crow’s-feet. But there are still some wrinkles in our common wisdom around this gesture. So let’s separate fact from fiction, shall we?

SMILING DOESN'T CAUSE WRINKLES.

That perception goes as far back as 19th-century Europe, posits Paul Jarrod Frank, a New York City dermatologist. “Mothers would tell their daughters not to smile until marriage or wrinkles would ensue and decrease one’s eligibility,” he says. The reality? You’re not going to get pronounced nasolabial folds or marionette lines (the creases that cradle either side of the mouth) from muscle movement alone. Most wrinkles are triggered by a combination of skin thickness, elasticity, fat distribution, and collagen content—“all of which have genetic and environmental influences,” says Frank. While crow’s-feet are partly caused by genuine smiles, dermatologists say they can be curbed by religiously using sunscreen and antioxidant serums. And if you really can’t stand the dang things, neuromodulators like Botox can soften them, adds Heidi Waldorf, a professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City.

BUT IT'S NOT A YOUTH SERUM, EITHER.

Though some studies have found that smiling gives people a more youthful appearance (the happier you appear, the less people notice the indignities of time), other data suggests that only those 40 and older enjoy the benefit of the halo effect. And research released earlier this year claims that a neutral expression is the key to shaving off years.

WOMEN SMILE WAY MORE THAN MEN.

Much of this is a sexist cultural construct, says Marianne LaFrance, a psychology professor at Yale University. “Women are expected to smile. If they don’t, they tend to get punished, socially speaking,” she notes. “There’s an assumption that being feminine is associated with looking pleasant. And the best way to indicate that you’re nice is to smile.” Power shifts that, regardless of sex: Those in positions of authority feel less obligated to demonstrate affability.

IT BRINGS US CLOSER TO ONE ANOTHER.

“Smiling has huge consequences for establishing connections,” says LaFrance. “A smile can improve and repair relationships or ease conflict. It’s a way of saying to the other person that you can be trusted.” New research from the University of Sussex in England echoes this, suggesting that smiling is more an act of engagement with people than an expression of inner joy. And you can fake it, to a point. A study by the *Journal of Psychiatry & Neuroscience* shows that one application of Botox can have an antidepressant effect. It supports the idea that facial expressions (and reactions to them) can influence your mood. Eva Ritvo, a psychiatrist in Miami Beach and the author of *Bekindr: The Transformative Power of Kindness*, hypothesizes that we draw on the power of mimicry: “I sometimes tell my patients to get Botox in between their brows, where frowns tend to show themselves. If you look like you’re frowning, people may pick up that negative emotion.”

IT'S NOT QUITE UNIVERSAL.

When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, armed soldiers were ordered to smile at civilians to indicate that they were not a threat. But just like language, facial expressions are used differently across cultures. A 2016 study by the *Journal of Non-verbal Behavior* found that in Japan, India, Iran, South Korea, and Russia, smiling indicates less intelligence. And in India and Argentina, smiling is associated with dishonesty (thought to be due to the people’s familiarity with corrupt politicians).