

The Whole World Smiles with You

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“When you’re smiling, when you’re smiling, the whole world smiles with you.” Thus crooned Frank Sinatra in his 1950 album *Swing and Dance*.

Research is now showing that Sinatra was teaching science as well as making music. A paper published in the journal *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* reviews the evidence for the contagious power of smiling (Wood et al., 2016).

It shows that human beings extract emotional meaning from the facial expressions of others. We then unconsciously mimic them. This can result in us feeling emotions similar to those we are observing. For instance, if you’re interacting with a team member whose facial expression your brain interprets as “sad,” you might unconsciously draw your face into a similar expression. This helps you recognize the other’s emotion by associating it with times in your past when you had similar experiences.

Paula Niedenthal, one of the study authors, adds these insights: “You reflect on your emotional feelings and then you generate some sort of recognition judgment, and the most important thing that results is that you take the appropriate action—you approach the person or you avoid the person. Your own emotional reaction to the face changes your perception of how you see the face, in such a way that provides you more information about what it means.”

This presents a barrier to people who have impaired ability to recognize emotions, such as those with autism, cognitive impairment, or facial paralysis. Niedenthal notes, “There are some symptoms in autism where lack of facial mimicry may in part be due to suppression of eye contact... it may be overstimulating socially to engage in eye contact, but under certain conditions, if you encourage eye contact, the benefit is spontaneous or automatic facial mimicry.”

The process occurs so quickly that it’s below the processing threshold of the conscious mind. The brain identifies the meaning behind another person’s smile or frown in a few milliseconds.

We’re doing this automatically all the time. This can produce a phenomenon called “emotional contagion.” In my book *Mind to Matter*, I provide many examples of how emotions can spread with astonishing speed. Within a few days, your smile might affect hundreds of thousands of other people.

Realizing that we’re producing emotional contagion allows us to take conscious control of the process. You can smile deliberately.

Smiling can even make the difference between life and death. A man we’ll call “Jim” tells the following story.

“I was going through one of the low points in my life. My wife Maddy had recently left me, taking the kids with her. I missed them so bad I felt this gnawing ache in my gut every day.

“Then the recession hit and I lost my job. For several months I applied for position after position and got turned down every time. I began to feel worthless. I contemplated suicide on and off. Then one day I decided to do it. Life just didn’t seem worth living anymore.

“I parked at the Golden Gate Bridge lot. My plan was to walk across to the middle and jump off the railing.

“At the pedestrian crossing to the bridge, the light turned red just as I got there. I stopped and waited, as did all the cars going in my direction. I looked at the car next to me. In it sat a peaceful looking woman with long gray hair. She turned and looked at me. She looked deep into my eyes.

“Then her face broke into the biggest smile you can imagine. I felt love simply radiating out from her. It reached down and warmed the center of my soul.

“I suddenly felt as though everything was going to be okay. I turned around and took a walk around the Presidio Park. I heard the birds singing. I noticed the flowers blooming. I saw the reflection of the trees in the pond and I knew everything was going to turn out fine. And it did.

“That woman’s smile changed my life.”

Once we understand the power of emotional contagion, we can begin to use it for positive effect. When you see your children or spouse in the morning, smile! If you're on a video call, smile at every person in the virtual room. In a live audience, smile. As you're walking through the shopping mall, smile at the people you see. You will be surprised at how often they smile back.

Even when I'm sitting at my computer answering emails, I smile at the invisible people with whom I'm corresponding. I'm smiling right now as I write this essay for you.

So smile long and often! And notice how the whole world smiles with you.

References

- Church, D. (2018). *Mind to matter: The astonishing science of how your brain creates material reality*. Carlsbad, CA: Hay House.
- Wood, A., Rychlowska, M., Korb, S., & Niedenthal, P. (2016). Fashioning the face: sensorimotor simulation contributes to facial expression recognition. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 20(3), 227–240.