

REFLECTION

What can't be covered: The power of smiles behind the mask

As I entered the emergency room bay, her scared eyes shouted silently. An elderly female in obvious distress, she was nonverbal except for head nods. No family accompanied her. As a medical student, I felt clinically powerless, but I knew I wanted to assist however possible. As an extrovert, it was natural for me to think in terms of a human connection. I navigated through the crowded room, hearing conversations of suspected infection, and positioned myself at the bedside. As our eyes met, I fully received her unspoken message: sheer terror. She started to reach up from her bed. I offered my hand, shrouded in plastic. She took it and held my gaze. I smiled from behind my mask and told her she was safe. As she relaxed into the bed, something about her eyes told me she was smiling back.

A simple smile seemed to help this elderly woman. Is this just an anecdote, or is there more to smiling that can be of benefit? Weeks later, as my mentor and I dug into the literature on smiling, our eyes widened, and our mouths opened beneath our masks—definite signs of surprise.

Increasingly, data connect a genuine smile to both physical and psychological well-being.¹⁻³ Neuroimaging studies suggest that spontaneous smiles, and even some voluntary smiles, can be associated with the activation of brain regions linked to positive emotional states.⁴ When we smile, we give a gift not only to others but also to ourselves.

Research also confirms that the typical response to seeing a smile is to smile in return.³ As the elderly woman in the ED demonstrated, when patients see a provider who smiles at them, it decreases their anxiety and increases trust.³ When a provider smiles, it can also increase patient's memory of what the provider discussed, allowing patients to better contribute to their own health.³


Our intuition, as well as research, tells us that smiles can be genuine or forced. In this era of masks, it is reassuring that the main clues distinguishing genuine or forced smiles involve muscles beyond the mouth or lips. Only a genuine, or Duchenne smile, also involves contraction of the orbicularis oculi and pars lateralis muscles, raising the cheeks and forming crow's feet around the eyes.^{3,4} Even with masks on, others can perceive and receive the benefits of a genuine smile.

Interestingly, just as we can see a smile around the eyes of a masked face, we can hear a smile as well. Research indicates that the sounds of words spoken with a smile are automatically associated with positive emotions. In fact, smiling can lead to changes in voice that are recognizable in as little as one word.⁵

In this time of increased virtual interactions, our ability to cultivate and maintain supportive relationships is paramount. We are

tuning into the impact of our smiles and expressions during video calls; here we have a built-in opportunity to continually monitor our facial expressions and spread the benefits of smiling.

For the foreseeable future, in-person encounters will continue to require masks. Meanwhile, it is reassuring to know that our smiles can be seen, felt, and heard. As we improve our happiness and well-being, we also increase our willingness to help others.³ Reflecting on the physical, psychological, and social benefits of smiles, we are noticing a big and very genuine smile spreading across our faces. So, go ahead—share your smile. You will enjoy the benefits, and so will those you serve and love.

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