



Warning! Your Smile May Be Contagious!

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Here's a startling piece of research.

Only 10% of our long-term happiness is predicted by the external world around us—the friends and family we bring into our lives, the jobs or careers we end up with, where we live and even our own state of health.

What determines the other 90%?

We do.

According to researcher Shawn Achor, who also designed and taught the famed "Happiness Course" at Harvard, 90% of how happy we feel is determined by what we think about the world we find ourselves in. In other words, happiness depends on our perspectives and attitudes.

For me, this is exciting. It means I can use the way I think as a tool to transcend the circumstances and situations I find myself in. All I have to do is change the lens through which I view the world and 90% of how I feel will change with it!

So, how can we adjust our attitudes, our perspectives, and even our thoughts without spending years in therapy? Shawn Achor's research says one of the best ways is really simple.

Smile.

More specifically, smile often and deliberately.

Consider this description of how smiling affected people working in a large hospital setting where everyone habitually rushed through their days, rarely taking time to chat or even acknowledge one another in the hallways. When consultants were hired to change an increasingly negative hospital culture, staff members were asked to make eye contact and smile when they were within 10 feet of one another in the hallway. Then, within five feet, they were instructed to say hello.

Lots of people, especially the doctors, groaned and resisted the instructions. They complained that it was a dumb exercise and grumbled that they were there to practice medicine, not socialize! But, as the project progressed, more and more people began smiling and saying hello. Since it was hard to resist without seeming downright rude, everyone was soon on board with the experiment and the hospital atmosphere became friendlier and happier. Patients felt the uplifted mood and began to refer their friends and family members. Doctors started to refuse better job offers from other institutions saying they'd rather stay because "there is just something about this place."



(Cont.)

Neuroscientists tell us that we have specialized brain cells, called mirror neurons, that sense, and then mimic, the feelings, behaviors, and physical sensations of others. When someone smiles at you, the mirror neurons think you are smiling, too. They sense that you are smiling and send a signal to your brain causing it to drop dopamine into your system. The dopamine, in turn, contorts your face into a smile.

This cycle is why babies repeat the funny faces their parents make and why smiles, along with emotions, seem to be contagious. Smiling tricks our brains into thinking we're happy, so our brains start producing the neurochemicals that actually do make us happy. Professionals who study body language and facial expressions call this the "ripple effect."

In his book *Social Intelligence*, Daniel Goldman says our brains read and identify the emotion on another person's face within 33 milliseconds and then, just as quickly, it releases the neurochemicals that prime us to feel the same. This is how moods can quickly jump from person to person. In fact, studies have shown that when three strangers meet in a room, the most emotionally expressive person transmits his or her mood to the others within just two minutes!

Emotions are so shared that organizational psychologists have found that each workplace develops its own group affect or tone which, over time, creates a workplace personality that can be joyful, toxic, or any emotional state in between!

Conventional wisdom says the preferred workplace attitude should be to work hard so we can be successful. Then, when we're successful, we can be happy. But, the smiling experiment shows this formula is actually backwards! When we begin with happiness, our brains become more engaged, motivated, and productive and lead us to become more successful. In the hospital case, happiness was the fuel for success not the other way around. Nothing changed in peoples' circumstances or in the external environment of the hospital. What did change, however, were peoples' perspectives, attitudes, and thoughts, especially about one another.

You can create a "ripple effect" in your veterinary hospital and organize a friendlier, happier workplace culture. Simply make eye contact, smile, and say hello each time you see a coworker. Then watch those mirror neurons go to work!

For more information, visit the Veterinary Wisdom® Resource Center at www.veterinarywisdom.com

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