



## *Just Grin and Bear It!*

At some point, we have all probably heard or thought something like this when facing a tough situation. But is there any truth to this piece of advice? Feeling good usually makes us smile, but does it work the other way around? Can smiling actually make us feel better? Psychological scientists Tara Kraft and Sarah Pressman of the University of Kansas looked into it and are publishing an article in the journal [\*Psychological Science\*](#).

Background: smiles are generally divided into two categories: *standard* smiles, which use the muscles surrounding the mouth, and *genuine* or *Duchenne* smiles, which engage the muscles surrounding both the mouth and eyes.

During the research, 169 participants were divided into three groups, and each group was trained to hold a different facial expression. Participants were instructed to hold chopsticks in their mouths in such a way that they engaged facial muscles used to create a neutral facial expression or a standard smile or a Duchenne smile. Chopsticks were essential to the task because they forced some people to smile without them being aware that they were doing so. Only half of the group members were actually instructed to smile.

Then the participants were asked to do stress-inducing activities -- tracing a star with their non-dominant hand or submerging a hand into ice water -- while still holding the chopsticks and the earlier facial expression.

The results suggest that smiling may actually influence our physical state. Compared to participants who held neutral facial expressions, participants who were instructed to smile, and in particular those with Duchenne smiles, had lower heart rate levels after recovery from the stressful activities. Even the participants who held chopsticks in a manner that forced them to smile (but were not explicitly told to smile) showed some positive effect compared to those who held neutral facial expressions. These findings show that smiling during brief stressors can help to reduce the intensity of the body's stress response, regardless of whether a person actually feels happy.

“The next time you are stuck in traffic or are experiencing some other type of stress,” says Pressman, “you might try to hold your face in a smile for a moment. Not only will it help you ‘grin and bear it’ psychologically, but it might actually help your heart health as well!”

### **Implications for Mentors**

Wise mentors know that mentees facing extreme distress must be allowed to feel what they feel with an empathetic listener nearby. That is not the time to ask for a smile. But your mentee will also inevitably encounter stress as part of daily life, whether in the home, in the neighborhood, or in the classroom. You are in a unique position to help them to learn positive methods for coping with that stress. Smiling during adversity is more than a superficial gesture. It can help promote real changes in your mentee that reduce the impacts of stress.

Excerpted from Preston, Justin. “Coping with stress? Start with a smile: How smiling promotes stress recovery.” *Chronicle of Evidence-Based Mentoring* Web. 8 Aug. 2009 <<http://chronicle.umbmentoring.org/?s=smile>>