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## Smile Wide

Want to be happier? Show off your pearly whites. *By Dr. Susan Maples*

Q: Now that I'm proud of my teeth, I smile more and I think I'm actually a happier person. How is that possible?

A: That's awesome, and somewhat predictable....here's why. Studies have shown that just engaging the smile muscles (especially zygomatic major) causes us to release positive endorphins. It turns out that even *faking* a smile releases tiny spurts of the stuff that makes us feel better. In one study (Fritz, 1988 comic review) a group of participants were asked to hold a pencil in their lips. A second group of participants were asked to hold the pencil in their teeth--with their lips not touching, thereby engaging their smile muscles. This second group, the unknowing "smilers", ranked the comics they were viewing significantly funnier than the straight-lipped group.

That's well and good....but wait there's more! Smiles are also **contagious**—they make other people inadvertently smile and feel happier, which in turn influences a more positive response toward *you*. (By the way, frowning also triggers others to unconsciously frown, and in turn feel crummy.) These emotional contagions are a result of an inherent physiologic process called *mimicry* and it's fascinating! Our ancestors' abilities to empathize with, or "danger-warn" by mimicking their neighbors' emotions were sometimes the communication determinants between life and death.

So *how* do you feel better? Let me recap some significant research. Smiling has measurable elevating effects on the body: It boosts our immune system, reduces stress, lowers blood pressure, enhances others' perceptions of us and, as you've noticed, significantly improves our personal affect.

Authentic smiles are also marked by eye muscle (obicularis oculii) engagement. Hence, squinty, smiling eyes spreads positivity. "Crow's-feet" convey feelings of amusement, optimism and joy. It's no surprise why many of our returning botox patients want treatment to smooth out their furrowed brows (which transmits feelings of anger or worry) but are far less concerned about erasing those expressive smile lines.

So go on with your happy self....squeeze your zygomatic major, squint your [orbicularis oculi](#), and by all means....show off your beautiful teeth!

