THE verywell mind podcast

WITH THERAPIST
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Welcome to *The Verywell Mind Podcast*. I'm Amy Morin, the editor-in-chief of Verywell Mind. I'm also a psychotherapist and a best-selling author of four books on mental strength.

You're listening to the Friday Fix. Every Friday, I share a quick mental strength strategy that can help fix the thoughts, feelings, and actions that hold you back in life.

And the fun part is we record the show from a sailboat in the Florida Keys.

Now, let's dive into today's episode!

Do you smile because you are happy or are you happy because you smile? You might think, well, of course, happy people smile. And that's true.

But there's also evidence that smiling can make you feel happy.

But if you're one of those people who is likely to roll your eyes and decide that pasting on a big fake smile actually makes you feel worse, stick with me.

There's research that shows that even a half-smile can be effective in reducing stress, boosting your mood, and making you feel better in just a few seconds.

Studies have found people feel calmer when they half-smile during stressful situations and their mood improves when they're feeling down.

That's because smiling releases tiny molecules in the brain that help the neurons reduce stress. A smile releases feel-good hormones like dopamine, serotonin, and endorphins. They lower your heart rate, lower your blood pressure, and help you relax. This boosts your mood fast.

Fortunately, your smile doesn't even have to be genuine for you to appreciate the benefits.
Smiling even when you don’t feel like it, still triggers the same response. So, it works even when you’re stressed out or you’re in a bad mood.

There’s research that shows that smiling during stressful times and right afterward helps your mind and your body recover faster.

But constant forced smiles might not always be a good idea. One study that found people who felt like they had to keep smiling at work (like teachers, nurses, and food service workers) might be wearing them down all day. These individuals were actually at a higher risk of drinking heavily once they clocked out of their jobs. Researchers suspect that they were simply drained of willpower, and they lacked self-control once they got out of work.

One of the authors of this study named Alicia Grandey, she’s a professor at Penn State. She said, "It wasn't just feeling badly that makes them reach for a drink. Instead, the more they have to control their negative emotions at work, the less they were able to control their alcohol intake after work."

So, why is it that a fake smile might help sometimes and not others?

It may be that a fake smile helps you when you're doing it for you. When you’re smiling for someone else though—like when you feel obligated to smile at a customer who is behaving rudely—you don’t get the same benefit as when you’re doing it for yourself.

The other difference might be the fact that some of the employees felt forced to paste on a fake smile all day long. There’s no doubt that can be exhausting.

Giving yourself a quick smile to feel better might not feel so forced. And when you do it willingly—rather than in an effort to keep your job—your brain might react differently.

But what can you do on those days when you feel so bad that you don’t think you can even fake a smile for yourself? This is where the “half-smile” comes in. It works just as well as a “big smile.”

There’s a study that involved a comedy show. Half of the audience was asked to hold a pencil between their teeth so the eraser was on one side of their face and the lead side of the pencil was on the other. Essentially, it forced them to “half-smile” in order to hold the pencil in place.

At the end of the performance, they polled the audience about how funny they thought the show was. Audience members who held the pencil in their mouths rated the show as funnier than those who didn’t. Researchers concluded that the people with the pencil in their mouths felt happier because they were half-smiling. Consequently, they got more enjoyment out of the comedy show.

So, how do you half-smile?

Essentially, you just smile a tiny bit. As soon as you notice tension at the corners of your mouth, stop. It can be really subtle. In fact, someone is looking at you, they probably
won’t even notice that you’re doing it. The point is to just communicate to your brain to release those feel-good chemicals. You don’t need to show anyone else that you’re smiling.

Try holding a half-smile as you take a few deep breaths. This gives your brain time to release those happy chemicals that act as a natural antidepressant.

The half-smile is a common strategy that we recommend in the therapy office to people who are having difficulty tolerating distress. But you don’t have to wait until you find yourself in a really stressful situation to give it a try.

You also might try it at other times throughout the day just to boost your mood. Here are some times when it might be helpful:

- **During a meeting:** When you find yourself zoning out in a meeting, go for a quick half-smile.

- **When you first wake up:** This might help you get out of bed in a better mood.

- **When you’re listening to music or watching TV:** This can help you get more enjoyment out of those things.

- **When you’re waiting:** Whether you’re in line at the store or you’re sitting in a waiting room, you might gain a little more patience when you half-smile.

So those are just a few ideas. You can try a half-smile pretty much any time, anywhere to relieve your stress and improve your mood. It’s quick, it’s easy, doesn’t cost any money, and you can try it any time.

Give it a try this week and let me know how it works for you!

If you know someone who could benefit from hearing this message, share it with them. Simply sharing the link to this episode could help someone feel better and grow stronger. And if you like our show, make sure to subscribe to us on your favorite platform.

Do you want free access to my online mental strength course? It’s called “10 Mental Strength Exercises That Will Help You Reach Your Greatest Potential.” To get your free pass, just leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. Take a screenshot of your review and email it to us. Our address is podcast@verywell.com. We’ll reply with your all-access pass to the course.

Thank you for hanging out with me today and for listening to *The Verywell Mind Podcast!*

And as always, a big thank you to my show’s producer (who agrees that half-smiling under stress actually works), Nick Valentin.