

## Smiling at People While You Wear a Mask Can Be Good For You

<sup>1</sup> It felt weird for many of us to put on a mask for the first time at the start of the pandemic. Our first thoughts were probably wondering how we looked and what other people would think when they saw us. But even as wearing masks started to feel normal, some of us still weren't sure what to do with our mouths behind the masks or whether we should look at other people around us who were wearing ones. If nobody can see the expression on our mouths, is it silly to smile at someone? Researchers say: No, it's not silly. In fact, a smile, even if it is unseen, can have a positive effect on our emotions and on those people we are smiling at.

<sup>2</sup> According to psychology lecturer, Alex Sel, when we smile while looking at someone, we tend to have more positive feelings about that other person's facial expressions. In other words, we're apt to think that person seems like a kind, honest or pleasant person. Sel conducted a study in which subjects were shown a set of pictures of people who had neutral expressions on their faces, in other words, not smiling or frowning. He used electrodes to measure the brain activity of the subjects as they were looking at the pictures. Some of the subjects were told to smile while looking at the pictures, and others were told to keep a neutral expression. From the brain activity of the subjects, Sel discovered that the ones who were smiling were more likely to have a positive reaction to faces in the pictures. Sel concluded that it's a good idea for us to smile behind our masks because if we don't, there is a good chance that we will perceive the people around us as less happy and friendly.

<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, smiling can have a positive effect on our attitude. In an experiment, subjects were told to hold a pen between their teeth while looking at some cartoons. For half the subjects, they were instructed to hold the pen in a position that would cause

them to smile and the other half to place the pen in a way that would keep them from smiling. The researchers found that the ones who smiled rated the cartoons that they were shown as funnier. In other words, just by smiling, the subjects increased their enjoyment.

<sup>4</sup> Because of the reduced opportunities to socialize with others these days, it's easy for people to feel disconnected with others. One easy way to change this is through eye-contact, whether or not we smile behind our masks.

<sup>5</sup> To study the effects of eye-contact, researchers set up an experiment with three conditions. In the first condition, as strangers passed by the experimenter, the experimenter gave the strangers neutral eye-contact. In other words, the experimenter didn't smile or frown. In the second condition, the experimenter gave the strangers eye contact plus a smile. But in the third condition, the experimenter gave just a quick glance in the direction of the stranger but not at their eyes.

<sup>6</sup> A research assistant followed the strangers for a minute, approached them and then asked them, "Within the last minute, how disconnected do you feel from others?" The results showed that the third group felt more disconnected than the other two groups. Interestingly, they indicated that they felt disconnected not only from the stranger (researcher) who had just glanced in their direction but also from people in general. In sum, if we make eye contact with others, we can actually make them feel more connected with others and perhaps less isolated.

<sup>7</sup> Life behind masks can be good. It's actually not that hard to follow some simple techniques to help us feel positive and give some comfort to those around us.

**Exercise:** Write T (true) or F (false) in the blanks.

- \_\_\_ 1. Many people started wearing masks because they were fashionable.
- \_\_\_ 2. Researchers tell us that smiling while wearing a mask can have good results.
- \_\_\_ 3. According to the article, if we smile at someone, they will think that we are happy.
- \_\_\_ 4. In paragraph 2, the subjects told the researchers their opinions of the people in the pictures.
- \_\_\_ 5. According to the article, if we don't smile behind our mask, we might think that people around us are unfriendly.
- \_\_\_ 6. According to paragraph 3, if we have a smile on our face, people will think that we are strange.
- \_\_\_ 7. According to the study in paragraph 5, if we make eye-contact with someone as we walk past them, we can help them feel less isolated.

Answer Key

1. F
2. T
3. F
4. F
5. T
6. F
7. T