

Cheerfulness and Your Bottom Line

My son is about to depart on the trip of a lifetime. He will be trekking on China's northern Silk Road for a month with a group of students from his high school. During the past few months, we have received many e-mails from the trip organizer giving us information about China's politics, culture, and history. One e-mail caught me by surprise. The teacher-tour leader sent this plea to the imminent travelers:

I spoke a few moments ago with another teacher about the trip she leads to New York City each year for the newspaper staff. It became clear that we both share an absolute understanding. The most important trait, natural or cultivated, on a group trip is cheerfulness.

Whether you do so now, I ask that each of you begin to practice and cultivate cheerfulness at all times no matter what happens. You will need to be physically, emotionally, and mentally in shape for the trip, and you should be training for all of these, but in the end, when the inevitable fatigue sets in, when expectations are disappointed, when culture shock begins to have its way with you, cheerfulness keeps the ship right. Lack of cheerfulness, or false cheerfulness, is poison. Please begin to examine yourself in terms of cheer. It will matter at 7 a.m. sometime about July 4, I promise.

Thank you.

Warren Frerichs, Group Tour Leader

Of all the attributes necessary for a successful adventure, apparently cheerfulness reigns as the No. 1 indicator. I maintain that the trait is vital for the success of your dental practice.

You might guess that depression and cheerfulness can be gauges for life satisfaction, but you might not have surmised how powerful these traits predict contentedness. According to Miranda Hill in an article titled "Canadian Study Shows Cheerfulness Helps, Depression Hurts," "Positive emotions and cheerfulness carried more weight than other upbeat traits in most surveys."

In this study, Canadian psychology professor Ulrich Schimack of the University of Toronto and his colleagues report, "Depression and positive emotions and cheerfulness are the personality traits that most influence life satisfaction." These findings come from four studies and include data from surveys of 136 students at the University of Toronto, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the University of California, Riverside.

Despite these disclosures, Vicki Haddock writes in a recent San Francisco Chronicle about the perils of living in a perpetually perky American culture. Her article, "The Only Thing We Have to Fear Is Cheer Itself," emphasizes that underneath this smiley-face momentum lies something serious: the expectation that everyone should join the glee club. Haddock's concerns are that our society isolates nonconformists in their misery and other countries may dismiss Americans as frivolous and insincere.

Despite these potential consequences to our positive psychology culture, Haddock concurs that there is "hard scientific truth in the adage that you can make

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yourself happy just by smiling.” Feelings seem to follow action. She cites medical studies that demonstrate biological benefits from a positive attitude to bolstering the immune system and speeding the healing process.

Authentic vs. false cheerfulness

Frerichs, the tour leader for the China trip, warns about fake cheer. He suggests that it’s just as poisonous as the lack of good cheer. Yet, the pressure to be cheerful is, for some, emotionally exhausting. Here are some ways to cultivate a sense of good cheer without feeling like a superficial counterfeit:

- Look at the bright side of the situation.
- Stay present.
- Breathe.
- Find the humor.
- Stay focused.
- Ask, “What am I seeing right now?”
- Ask, “What am I feeling right now?”
- Ask, “What am I doing right now?”
- Try not to feel like you must be perfect.
- Remind yourself of three great things that have happened today.
- Practice the attitude of gratitude.
- Remain flexible.
- Smile.

The social rewards for good cheer are real. My mom always said, “Smile, and the world smiles with you; cry, and you cry alone.” A positive, real smile and upbeat attitude can help you land the sale, the hot date, the favor, and likely a smile in return.

Think of all the ways that cheerfulness affects your dental practice, from case acceptance to a more cohesive dental team. A cheerful office adds dollars to your bottom line.

In Frerich’s letter to his teenage travelers, he warns that when everyone is exhausted, when expectations aren’t met, and when there’s no Pizza Hut in sight, cheerfulness “keeps the ship right.”

In your dental practice, when *you’re* tired, when *you’re* not meeting your goals, and when *your* office systems seem awry, cheerfulness will keep *your* “ship right.”

As this brave teacher concluded in his e-mail, “Please begin to examine yourself in terms of cheer.” ■

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