

Poker-faced professions take toll on employees

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Employees who have to maintain a neutral disposition while they are on the clock tend to spend more energy to meet that requirement; therefore, they have less energy to devote to work tasks, according to new research from Rice University, the University of Toronto and Purdue University.

The researchers found that workers who must avoid appearing either overly positive or negative -- such as journalists, health care professionals, [social workers](#), lawyers and law enforcement officers -- suppress expressions of emotion more than workers in other service-oriented professions, where the expression of positive emotions is called for.

"Our study shows that emotion suppression takes a toll on people," said Daniel Beal, assistant professor of psychology at Rice and co-author of the study. "It takes energy to suppress emotions, so it's not surprising that workers who must remain neutral are often more rundown or show greater levels of [burnout](#). The more energy you spend controlling your emotions, the less energy you have to devote to the task at hand."

Beal and his co-authors, John Trougakos of the University of Toronto and Christine Jackson of Purdue University, found that [employees](#) will generally engage in higher levels of suppression in an attempt to adhere to the neutral display requirement to meet the expectations of their managers or the public.

Another consequence that the researchers noticed was that customers

who interacted with a neutrally expressive employee were in less-positive moods and, in turn, gave lower ratings of service quality and held less-positive attitudes toward that employee's organization. The findings suggest that even though [neutrality](#) in such jobs is required for a number of reasons -- to maintain trust, to keep a situation calm, to not influence the actions of others -- it may not result in a particularly positive reaction from others.

"When an employee is positive, it transfers to the client or customer they're working with," Beal said. "Because of that good mood, the client or customer then would rate the organization better. But if an employee is maintaining a neutral demeanor, you don't have those good feelings transferred. If an organization's goal is to be unbiased, then that may trump any desire the organization has to be well-liked."

For the study, the researchers trained participants to perform as poll workers in two different conditions. In one condition, the training emphasized being positive to provide a good impression of the organization sponsoring the survey. In the second condition, the training emphasized being neutral so as not to bias the responses of survey respondents. Results supported the idea that neutral displays require greater emotion suppression and this greater suppression led to less persistence at the surveying task and greater avoidance of potential survey respondents.

While other research has focused on jobs that require the suppression of negative feelings, such as customer service representatives, this is the first such study to examine the jobs that require a neutral disposition and the consequences of suppressing both negative and positive emotions on the job.

The study, "Service Without a Smile: Comparing the Consequences of Neutral and Positive Display Rules," will be published in the

forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

Provided by Rice University

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