

Easily embarrassed? Study finds people will trust you more

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If tripping in public or mistaking an overweight woman for a mother-to-be leaves you red-faced, don't feel bad. A new study from the University of California, Berkeley, suggests that people who are easily embarrassed are also more trustworthy, and more generous.

In short, embarrassment can be a good thing.

"Embarrassment is one emotional signature of a person to whom you can entrust valuable resources. It's part of the social glue that fosters trust and cooperation in everyday life," said UC Berkeley [social psychologist](#) Robb Willer, a coauthor of the study published in this month's online issue of the [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#).

Not only are the UC Berkeley findings useful for people seeking cooperative and reliable team members and business partners, but they also make for helpful dating advice. Subjects who were more easily embarrassed reported higher levels of [monogamy](#), according to the study.

"Moderate levels of embarrassment are signs of virtue," said Matthew Feinberg, a doctoral student in psychology at UC Berkeley and lead author of the paper. "Our data suggests embarrassment is a good thing, not something you should fight." The paper's third author is UC Berkeley psychologist Dacher Keltner, an expert on pro-social emotions.

Researchers point out that the moderate type of embarrassment they

examined should not be confused with debilitating [social anxiety](#) or with "shame," which is associated in the psychology literature with such moral transgressions as being caught cheating.

While the most typical gesture of embarrassment is a downward gaze to one side while partially covering the face and either smirking or grimacing, a person who feels shame, as distinguished from embarrassment, will typically cover the whole face, Feinberg said.

The results were gleaned from a series of experiments that used video testimonials, economic trust games and surveys to gauge the relationship between embarrassment and pro-sociality.

In the first experiment, 60 college students were videotaped recounting embarrassing moments such as public flatulence or making incorrect assumptions based on appearances. Typical sources of embarrassment included mistaking an overweight woman for being pregnant or a disheveled person for being a panhandler. Research assistants coded each video testimonial based on the level of embarrassment the subjects showed.

The college students also participated in the "Dictator Game," which is used in economics research to measure altruism. For example, each was given 10 raffle tickets and asked to keep a share of the tickets and give the remainder to a partner. Results showed that those who showed greater levels of embarrassment tended to give away more of their raffle tickets, indicating greater generosity.

Researchers also surveyed 38 Americans whom they recruited through Craigslist. Survey participants were asked how often they feel embarrassed. They were also gauged for their general cooperativeness and generosity through such exercises as the aforementioned dictator game.

In another experiment, participants watched a trained actor being told he received a perfect score on a test. The actor responded with either embarrassment or pride. They then played games with the actor that measured their trust in him based on whether he had shown pride or embarrassment.

Time and again, the results showed that [embarrassment](#) signals people's tendency to be pro-social, Feinberg said. "You want to affiliate with them more," he said, "you feel comfortable trusting them."

So, can one infer from the results that overly confident people aren't trustworthy? While the study didn't delve into that question, researchers say they may look into that in the future.

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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