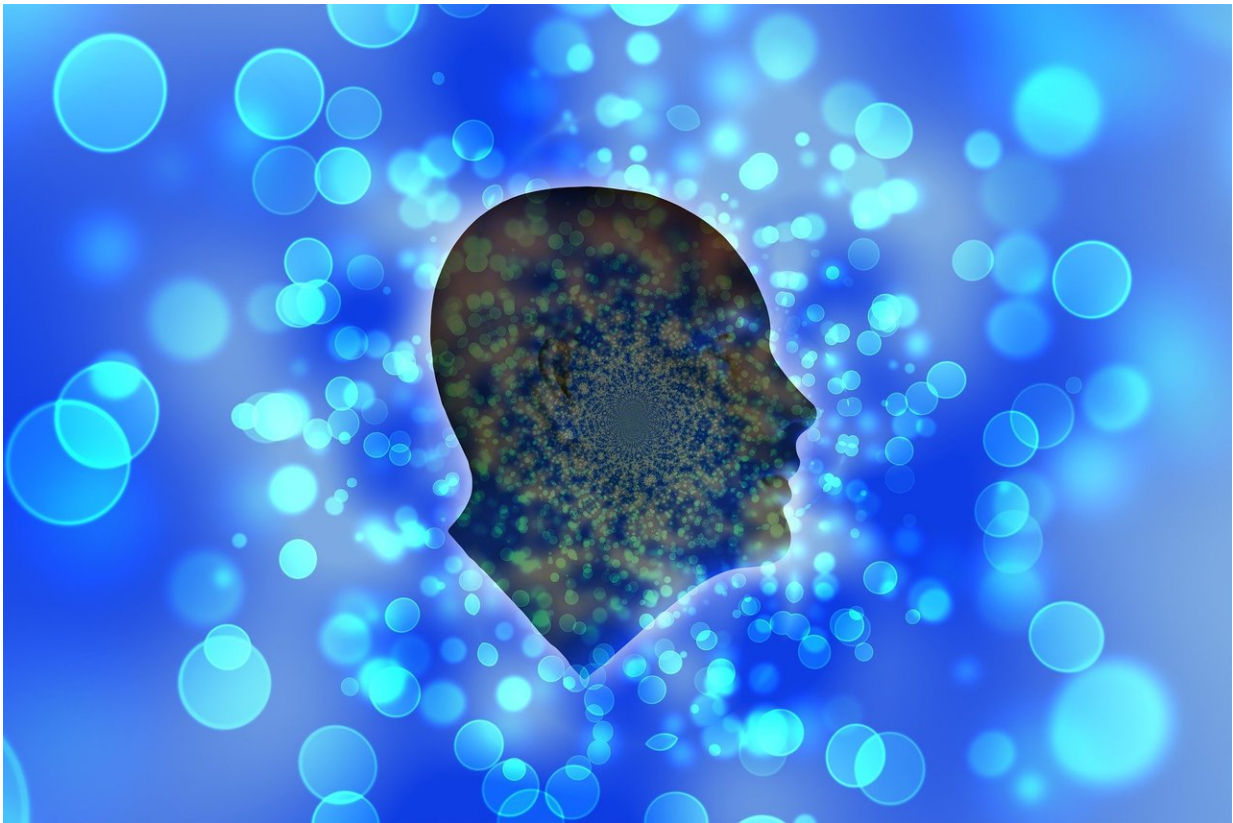


# Fake it 'till you make it? Study finds it's better to live in the emotional moment

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A study from the University of Ottawa's Faculty of Social Sciences has revealed the limitations of manipulating emotional responses to counter distressing moments, with participants—particularly women—relying on

spontaneous regulated emotion rather than a forced response to cope. These findings cast doubt on past research that suggested using a poker face or a forced smile as go-to options for suppressing emotional expression.

The project was part of first author Nancy Bahl's Ph.D. thesis in Clinical Psychology, conducted under the supervision of Allison Ouimet, an Associate Professor in the School of Psychology at uOttawa. Drs. Bahl and Ouimet answered questions about the research.

## **What is this research about?**

"People use emotion regulation strategies to try to change the type, intensity or duration of their emotional experiences. There is a lot of research suggesting that some strategies, like changing our perspective, are more helpful than others, and there is a huge body of research suggesting that hiding our [emotional](#) expression when we're distressed actually makes us feel worse. One type of therapy teaches people to put on a 'half-smile' when experiencing distress to improve their mood. These two bodies of research contradict each other.

"We found no effect whatsoever of keeping a poker face or smiling when watching negative pictures on participants' self-reported mood, physiology, or memory, in contrast to past research. Most importantly, at the end of the study, participants reported that regardless of what they were instructed to do to manage their emotions, the overwhelming majority reported using other emotion regulation strategies, like changing their perspective about the pictures. In other words, experimental research that tests one emotion regulation strategy against another may have an important flaw: that participants regulate their emotions spontaneously, no matter what experimental condition they're in."

## Can you explain the process behind your research?

"We recruited a relatively diverse sample of young women, 144 in total. When participants came into the lab, we measured their mood and their baseline sympathetic nervous system activity. We randomly assigned them to one of three conditions: expressive suppression ([poker face](#)), expressive dissonance (smile), or control (show your emotions the way you usually would). Each condition received different instructions on how to manage the [negative emotions](#) they might feel when looking at upsetting pictures. We measured their sympathetic nervous system activity during the picture-viewing task and asked them to report their mood during the task. They then completed a surprise task testing their memory for the pictures that they saw. They ended the experiment by completing questionnaires about how they managed their emotions during the task.

"We were surprised to find no differences between the conditions. When we looked at what participants reported at the end of the study, we were surprised by just how many people used other emotion regulation strategies on top of the one they were asked to use. This casts doubt on past findings."

## What conclusions should we take from this?

"Hiding your emotions or smiling when you're feeling anxious or sad might not be as maladaptive as we previously thought—at least for young women. Perhaps more importantly, it might not be all that useful to compare one emotion regulation strategy against another in research.

"Researchers need to focus more on how people choose which strategies they use, in which types of situation. For example, it might cause problems in your relationship if you are frequently hiding your feelings

from your partner, but it might also cause problems at your work if you never hide your feelings, even from your boss at an important meeting. No strategy is always helpful or harmful; instead, it is probably better to be flexible about which [strategy](#) you use, depending on the context."

The research is published in the *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*.

**More information:** Nancy Bahl et al, Smiling won't necessarily make you feel better: Response-focused emotion regulation strategies have little impact on cognitive, behavioural, physiological, and subjective outcomes, *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jbtep.2021.101695](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbtep.2021.101695)

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