

Forcing a smile for customers linked with more drinking after work

9 April 2019



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Employees who force themselves to smile and be happy in front of customers—or who try to hide feelings of annoyance—may be at risk for heavier drinking after work, according to researchers.

A team of researchers at Penn State and the University at Buffalo studied the drinking habits of people who routinely work with the public, for example people in [food service](#) who work with customers, nurses who work with patients or teachers who work with students.

They found a link between those who regularly faked or amplified [positive emotions](#), like smiling, or suppressed [negative emotions](#)—resisting the urge to roll one's eyes, for example—and heavier drinking after work.

Alicia Grandey, professor of psychology at Penn State, said the results suggest that employers may want to reconsider "service with a smile" policies.

"Faking and suppressing emotions with customers was related to drinking beyond the stress of the job or feeling negatively," Grandey said. "It wasn't just

feeling badly that makes them reach for a drink. Instead, the more they have to control negative emotions at work, the less they are able to control their alcohol intake after work."

While previous research has shown a connection between service workers and problems with drinking, Grandey said the reasons why were not known. She hypothesized that by faking or suppressing emotions in front of customers, employees may be using a lot of self-control. Later, those employees may not have a lot of self-control left to regulate how much alcohol they drink.

"Smiling as part of your job sounds like a really positive thing, but doing it all day can be draining," Grandey said. "In these [jobs](#), there's also often money tied to showing positive emotions and holding back negative feelings. Money gives you a motivation to override your natural tendencies, but doing it all day can be wearing."

For the study, the researchers used data from phone interviews with 1,592 U.S. workers. The data came from a larger survey funded by the National Institutes of Health, called the National Survey of Work Stress and Health, which included almost 3,000 participants who were representative of the U.S. working population.

Data included information about how often the participants faked or suppressed emotions, also called "surface acting," as well as how often and how much the participants drank after work. The researchers also measured how impulsive the participants are and how much autonomy they feel they have at work.

The researchers found that overall, employees who interacted with the public drank more after work than those who did not. Additionally, surface acting was also linked with drinking after work, and that connection was stronger or weaker depending on the person's trait-like self-control and the job's

extent of self-control.

"The relationship between surface acting and drinking after work was stronger for people who are impulsive or who lack personal control over behavior at work," Grandey said. "If you're impulsive or constantly told how to do your job, it may be harder to rein in your emotions all day, and when you get home, you don't have that self-control to stop after one drink."

In particular, the researchers found a stronger association between surface acting and [drinking](#) when employees who are highly impulsive also worked in jobs where employees have one-time service encounters with customers, like a call center or coffee shop, rather than relationships, like health care or education.

Grandey said people in these jobs tend to be younger and in entry-level positions, and may lack the self-control tendencies and the financial and [social rewards](#) that can buffer the costs of surface acting.

According to Grandey, the results—recently published in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*—suggest that surface acting is less likely to create problems when the work is personally rewarding to the [employee](#).

"Nurses, for example, may amplify or fake their emotions for clear reasons," Grandey said. "They're trying to comfort a patient or build a strong relationship. But someone who is faking emotions for a customer they may never see again, that may not be as rewarding, and may ultimately be more draining or demanding."

Grandey added that employers may be able to use these insights to create healthier workplace environments.

"Employers may want to consider allowing employees to have a little more autonomy at [work](#), like they have some kind of choice on the job," Grandey said. "And when the [emotional](#) effort is clearly linked to financial or relational rewards, the effects aren't so bad."

More information: Alicia A. Grandey et al, When are fakers also drinkers? A self-control view of emotional labor and alcohol consumption among U.S. service workers., *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1037/ocp0000147](#)

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

APA citation: Forcing a smile for customers linked with more drinking after work (2019, April 9) retrieved 16 January 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-04-customers-linked.html>

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