

Oh no you didn't!

Embarrassment acts as a social glue that can strengthen our relationships, but it also has a dark side, research finds.

BY KIRSTEN WEIR

Fair warning: If you participate in a psychological experiment about embarrassment, you might find yourself squirming in your seat. One popular study design, for instance, asks participants to sing aloud, and then forces them to watch a video of themselves belting out the tune sans musical accompaniment. Another clever study claimed to employ eye-tracking software as volunteers gazed at photos. Researchers led volunteers to believe they'd spent an inordinate amount of time focusing on the crotch of a fellow in a Speedo. Cue the sheepish looks.

Embarrassment may be painful for those who experience it, but it's a handy emotion to study, says Christine Harris, PhD, a psychologist at the University of California, San Diego.

"Embarrassment is pretty easy to trigger, which speaks to how powerful a force it is for almost all of us," she says.

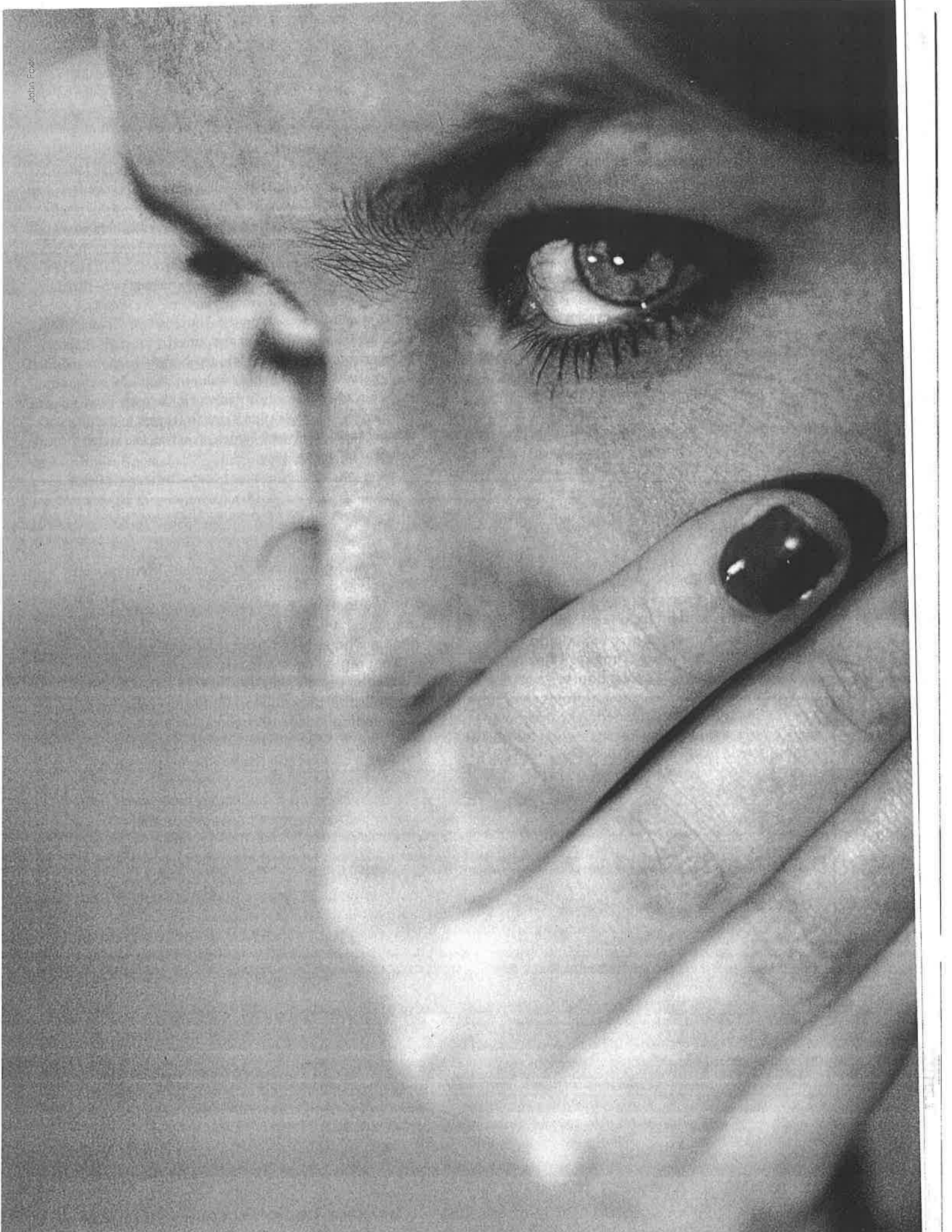
Powerful, but also puzzling. Why are we so quick to feel an emotion that makes us so uncomfortable? What does a tendency toward mortification mean? Psychologists' research reveals this complex sentiment comes with both pros and

cons. Embarrassment may repair social relationships and even advertise positive character traits, but at the same time, that sheepishness could lead you to make less-than-stellar decisions.

Why the red face?

Embarrassment has evolved in humans as a way to grease our social interactions, Harris says. "Group living has been important to us for a long time, and even if you don't intentionally want to violate a social norm, you sometimes do. Embarrassment serves the function of immediately and strongly displaying, 'Oops, I didn't mean to do that.'"

Recent research has expanded our understanding of the social side of embarrassment. As a doctoral candidate, Matthew Feinberg, PhD, now a postdoctoral scholar at Stanford University, explored the social benefits of embarrassment with University of California, Berkeley, social psychologists Robb Willer, PhD, and Dacher Keltner, PhD. The researchers found that people who tended to express more outward signs of embarrassment while describing their embarrassing moments



(such as tripping or passing gas in public) also reported a tendency to be more “prosocial” — that is, kinder and more generous (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2012). And in fact, those easily embarrassed people proved to be more generous in a lab experiment in which they were asked to share raffle tickets with strangers.

In another facet of that study, Feinberg and his colleagues found that revealing embarrassment offers a social benefit as well. They exposed volunteers to an actor who expressed either embarrassment or pride after a researcher publicly praised his performance on a test. When the actor expressed embarrassment, study participants found him more trustworthy and wanted to affiliate with him more.

“Clearly, people don’t enjoy experiencing embarrassment,” Feinberg says. “But in the bigger social picture, there’s a plus.”

The benefit of embarrassment, however, might depend on who’s watching. Anja Eller, PhD, an associate professor of social

psychology at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, has found that people are more likely to be embarrassed when they err in front of members of their own social group. People are less embarrassed when outsiders see them goof up, especially when the outsiders are seen as lower in status, she found (*European Journal of Social Psychology*, 2011). “We identify with in-group members, and generally value their opinions more than out-group members,” she says.

The finding may have practical implications for intergroup relations. In most cases, Eller says, embarrassment is adaptive. Expressing the emotion tends to repair social relations and elicit forgiveness. And as Feinberg has shown, signs of sheepishness may even advertise trustworthiness. On the other hand, failure to experience or display much embarrassment to members of another social group may harden prejudices and widen the gap between “us” versus “them.”

However, increased contact between two social groups

A complex emotion

Embarrassment is what’s known as a self-conscious emotion. While basic emotions such as anger, surprise or fear tend to happen automatically, without much cognitive processing, the self-conscious emotions, including shame, guilt and pride, are more complex. They require self-reflection and self-evaluation.

Typically, a set of behaviors unfolds over time when a person is embarrassed: A woman who calls a new acquaintance by the wrong name, for example, will likely gaze downward, suppress a smile, turn her head away and then shift her gaze. (Blushing is also common, but it’s not universal, Harris says.) Behind the scenes, there’s a distinct physiological pattern taking place. In emotions such as anger and fear, both heart rate and blood pressure spike. In embarrassment, Harris found, these two measures spike initially — but soon heart rate slows down again, while blood pressure continues to rise (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2001). “That coupling might be a unique signature to embarrassment,” she says.

Where does embarrassment arise in the brain? Recently, Virginia Sturm, PhD, an assistant professor of neurology at the University of California, San Francisco, and colleagues tracked down a bit of gray matter that appears to play a major role in embarrassment. Sturm studied patients with a form of frontotemporal dementia, a degenerative brain disease that causes profound changes in personality and behavior. Patients with

the disease often say or do socially inappropriate things without seeming to feel any humiliation. She found that a brain region called the right pregenual anterior cingulate cortex was smaller in people who suffered from the disease.

That region seems to spawn embarrassment in healthy people, too. Sturm found that healthy control subjects who weren’t easily embarrassed by watching videos of themselves singing the 1964 hit “My Girl” had a smaller pregenual anterior cingulate cortex than healthy controls who were more mortified by the performance.

Psychologists are quick to point out that there’s a significant difference between shame and embarrassment. “A lot of people intuitively think there’s a connection, that embarrassment is a weaker form of shame,” says June Tangney, PhD, a psychologist at George Mason University. But that seems not to be the case.

Shame, she’s found, is much more intense and likely to be associated with moral transgressions. And while most people feel shame in the company of others, “solitary” shame is not uncommon, she says. Embarrassment, on the other hand, tends to stem from social slip-ups, and we rarely experience it outside a social context. Embarrassed folks are also more inclined to laugh about an embarrassing incident. “When people feel shame,” she says, “there’s no sense of humor about it at all.”

—KIRSTEN WEIR

reduces prejudice, Eller says. As people get to know members of an outside group, they begin to care more about how they're perceived by them, increasing the likelihood that they'll become embarrassed in awkward situations. When it comes to bridging social differences, in other words, a little embarrassment may go a long way.

Being judged

Embarrassment does have a dark side, however. "On first blush, embarrassment may seem like a very benign emotion. But as you start to explore the motivational effects that embarrassment has, there are substantial real-world consequences — even people risking their health or their lives," says Harris.

Case in point: shopping for condoms. Researchers at Duke University found that buying condoms often elicits embarrassment, potentially putting people at risk of sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies if they're too mortified to take the prophylactics through the checkout lane (*Psychology, Health & Medicine*, 2006). That's just one of many examples of embarrassment affecting our well-being. Men may fail to get prostate exams, women could skip mammograms, seniors may avoid using hearing aids, and people of all stripes might fail to mention awkward symptoms or avoid the doctor altogether.

"Fear of embarrassment causes people to behave in really irrational ways," says Harris. "Understanding more about the

emotion itself can help people decide when they should think twice about embarrassment preventing them from engaging in behaviors."

Unfortunately, she adds, it's not clear how best to help people deal with the emotion. For some people, it can become crippling — not just in a health-care setting, but in other social situations as well, from making new friends to going on dates. "We don't have good ways of telling people how they can cope with their embarrassment," she says.

The good news, though, is that others may not judge us as severely as we judge ourselves. Kenneth Savitsky, PhD, at Williams College, and colleagues asked volunteers to imagine a social mishap or public failure, such as bumping into classmates at the mall while carrying a bag from a low-status store, or forgetting to check out a library book, thereby setting off an alarm. They also embarrassed subjects publicly by describing them in an unflattering way to an observer. In all cases, the researchers found that observers judged people much less harshly than the embarrassed people expected (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2001).

So, the next time you trip on the sidewalk, forget an acquaintance's name or realize your fly has been down all day, take a deep breath and try to shake it off. Your ruby-red cheeks and nervous smile may be broadcasting your best traits. ■

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The lesser-known signs of mortification



It's not just your red face that gives you away.

Dr. Christine Harris discusses some subtle signs of embarrassment, and more, in the *Monitor's* digital edition.

Go to www.apa.org/monitor/digital/embarrassment.aspx.

