

Power Posing: Fake It Until You Make It

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We can't be the alpha dog all of the time. Whatever our personality, most of us experience varying degrees of feeling in charge. Some situations take us down a notch while others build us up.

New research shows that it's possible to control those feelings a bit more, to be able to summon an extra surge of power and sense of well-being when it's needed: for example, during a job interview or for a key presentation to a group of skeptical customers.

"Our research has broad implications for people who suffer from feelings of powerlessness and low self-esteem due to their hierarchical rank or lack of resources," says HBS assistant professor Amy J.C. Cuddy, one of the researchers on the study.

| "It's not about the content of the message, but how you're communicating it."

In "Power Posing: Brief Nonverbal Displays Affect Neuroendocrine Levels and Risk Tolerance", Cuddy shows that simply holding one's body in expansive, "high-power" poses for as little as two minutes stimulates higher levels of testosterone (the hormone linked to power and dominance in the animal and human worlds) and lower levels of cortisol (the "stress" hormone that can, over time, cause impaired immune functioning, hypertension, and memory loss).

The result? In addition to causing the desired hormonal shift, the power poses led to increased feelings of power and a greater tolerance for risk.

"We used to think that emotion ended on the face," Cuddy says. "Now there is established research showing that while it's true that facial expressions reflect how you feel, you can also 'fake it until you make it.' In other words, you can smile long enough that it makes you feel happy. This work extends that finding on facial feedback, which is decades old, by focusing on postures and measuring neuroendocrine levels."

The Experiment

In their article, to be published in a forthcoming *Psychological Science*, Cuddy and coauthors Dana R. Carney and Andy J. Yap of Columbia University detail the results of an experiment in which forty-two male and female participants were randomly assigned to a high- or low-power pose group. No one was told what the study was about; instead, each participant believed it was related to the placement of ECG electrodes above and below his or her heart.

Subjects in the high-power group were manipulated into two expansive poses for one minute each: first, the classic feet on desk, hands behind head; then, standing and leaning on one's hands over a desk. Those in the low-power group were posed for the

time period in two restrictive poses: sitting in a chair with arms held close and hands folded, and standing with arms and legs crossed tightly. Saliva samples taken before and after the posing measured testosterone and cortisol levels. To evaluate risk tolerance, participants were given \$2 and told they could roll a die for even odds of winning \$4. Finally, participants were asked to indicate how "powerful" and "in charge" they felt on a scale from one to four.

Controlling for subjects' baseline levels of both hormones, Cuddy and her coauthors found that high-power poses decreased cortisol by about 25 percent and increased testosterone by about 19 percent for both men and women. In contrast, low-power poses increased cortisol about 17 percent and decreased testosterone about 10 percent.

Not surprisingly, high-power posers of both sexes also reported greater feelings of being powerful and in charge. In addition, those in the high-power group were more likely to take the risk of gambling their \$2; 86 percent rolled the die in the high-power group as opposed to 60 percent of the low-power posers.

Previous research established that situational role changes can cause shifts in hormone levels. In primate groups, for example, after an alpha male dies the testosterone levels of the animal replacing him go up. The hormonal shifts measured in this experiment show that such changes can be influenced independent of role, situation, or any consciously focused thoughts about power. The physical poses are enough.

And that, she suggests, has broad implications for people who suffer from feelings of powerlessness and low self-esteem due to their hierarchical rank or lack of resources.

Why We Judge

Cuddy's overall research agenda focuses on stereotyping and questions around how we form judgments of others' warmth and competence.

[Just Because I'm Nice, Don't Assume I'm Dumb \(pdf\)](#) reveals how and why we come to snap judgments about coworkers (and how to fight that natural instinct). The article was cited as a "Breakthrough Business Idea" for 2009 by *Harvard Business Review*.

"The power poses paper came about in part because my coauthor Dana and I had noticed that women in our classes seemed to be participating less," says Cuddy, who teaches the MBA elective Power and Influence. "Some of the women exhibited body language associated with low power, so we wondered if that was in turn affecting how they feel," she adds, citing the "fake it till you make it" research that shows smiling can affect feelings and hormone levels.

“It's about understanding what moves people.”

"The poses that we used in the experiment are strongly associated across the animal kingdom with high and low dominance for very straightforward evolutionary reasons. Either you want to be big because you're in charge, or you want to close in and hide your

vital organs because you're not in charge.

"It does appear that even this minimal manipulation can change people's physiology and psychology and, we hope, lead to very different, meaningful outcomes, whether it's how they perform in a job interview or how they participate in class."

Cuddy acknowledges that there are moderating factors in how easily some groups can use traditional power poses. It would run counter to social norms, for example, if a woman wearing a skirt sat with her feet up on her desk while talking to a colleague.

"I'm not saying it's fair, but there is a different range for women versus men," says Cuddy, who also teaches several HBS Executive Education programs.

Female managers seem to have an intuition about the need to communicate confidence by striking expansive poses through other means. They might use a whiteboard as a prop that they can reach out and rest a hand on—allowing them to take up more space.

"There are implications across cultures as well," she adds. Cuddy believes American poses are bigger and more flamboyant than what would be acceptable in Korea or Japan, for example, and expects to focus on this question in future research.

Warmth Versus Competence

It ultimately boils down to how we connect to one another. In general, she says, people form impressions of others through a matrix of how much we trust and like them and how much we think they're competent and respect them.

For the most part people underestimate the powerful connection of warmth and overestimate the importance of competence.

"We are influenced, and influence others, through very unconscious and implicit processes," she says. "People tend to spend too much energy focusing on the words they're saying—perfectly crafting the content of the message—when in many cases that matters much less than how it's being communicated. People often are more influenced by how they feel about you than by what you're saying. It's not about the content of the message, but how you're communicating it.

"Many students believe that if they have a great idea, they should be able to magnetize their audience toward them because their audience will recognize the 'greatness' of that idea—that they'll get on board because the idea is so good," she continues. "I try to show students that it doesn't work that way—you have to go meet people where they are and then all move together. You have to connect with them before you can lead them."

If understanding how you are influenced and can influence others feels a bit too Machiavellian, Cuddy helps bring it down a notch.

"It's not about politics," she says. "It's about understanding what moves people."

