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## BODY SCIENCE

# Bloom in the cheeks isn't always rosy

**BY EVE GLICKSMAN**  
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How is it that you can spend weeks trying to impress the boss, but as soon as you're complimented, your cheeks may turn colors that belong only in sunsets?

Nearly everyone has experienced that deep, unbidden rush of rufescence to the face known as blushing. Charles Darwin was the first to study the phenomenon in 1873, attributing the behavior to a combination of shyness, shame, modesty and self-consciousness.

We first may blush as early as ages two or three when our conscience begins to form. The reaction occurs when the central nervous system picks up an emotion in the brain and the signals travel to the capillaries in the face. The capillaries, normally contracted, open and fill with blood, producing the familiar crimson glow and the warm, tingling sensation. The process is automatic and unconscious, much like an eye blink.

Anxiety, fear and anger are the chief triggers, according to Alan Bellack, a clinical psychologist and head of the Behavior Therapy Clinic at the Medical College of Pennsylvania. Bellack believes the red-faced response is inherited, establishing that there is such a thing as "having a predisposition to blushing."

"Given the same stress, there are physiological differences in how each of our bodies reacts. Some people respond with increased blood pressure or by blushing, while others develop neck tension or gastric problems," Bellack says. "Whether you're a blusher is a coincidence of biology. It's your particular pattern of responding to stress."

Being a habitual blusher, in other words, doesn't necessarily mean that you get more embarrassed than the next person. "It's part and parcel of the way we're made up," Bellack says. Persistent blushing, he suggests, may be the result of highly reactive blood vessels inherited from a parent. Everybody — regardless of skin color — has the capacity to blush, but it's more apparent in fair-skinned people. As for the psycholog-

ical causes of blushing, society teaches what to be embarrassed about, Bellack says.

Still, while behavioral experts consider blushing "absolutely normal," some frequent blushers attest that life is not all rosy. Indeed, when it comes to emotional responses it is, of course, much easier to spot a florid complexion than an increased heart rate, notes Michael Ascher, professor of psychiatry at Temple University Medical School. As a rule, he says, blushers do not like to be singled out. "A blush means that a person is beyond his or her level of comfort."

Ascher has treated patients who have wanted to reduce incidents of blushing. In one case, a female executive feared her constant blushing got in the way of her being seen as an equal to men in the office. While the men found her blush attractive, says Ascher, she believed that blushing made her seem different and ultimately hurt her position.

Ascher was able to help her control the blushing with a technique called paradoxical intention — a kind of reverse psychology — in which a person tries to do the very thing he or she wants to curb. The patient's therapy, in part, was to go into potential high-blush situations and try to turn fuchsia.

Anxiety about blushing only will produce more blushing, Ascher says. "If you genuinely try to blush, though, you won't be able to. The paradox is that you can't force yourself to become anxious."

Why are we so self-conscious about blushing? Jean Helz, a clinical assistant professor of psychiatry and human behavior at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia, says that we tell our secrets when we blush. "Blushing is an internal sign of what you don't want others to see or what you can't accept about yourself."

People blush because they think they shouldn't feel whatever they're feeling."

This explains why a woman with a secret infatuation may blush when the man she has been attracted to suddenly pays her a compliment. On one hand, she longs for his attention, but on the other hand, she is ashamed of her feelings. She blushes, feeling exposed and vulnerable.

"Blushing is a secondary sexual characteristic," Ascher says.

Evidence of the sexual significance of blushing goes back to ancient times. Records indicate that girls who blushed freely when offered for sale at slave markets fetched higher prices from harem owners than those who did not. "A blush can mean that the woman likes the man she is blushing in front of," Ascher says.

Blushing also may indicate hidden aggression, Helz says. That is why we may blush if someone at the office suggests that we are looking for a promotion. If someone who has been taught that power-seeking is not a worthy trait, the internal conflict caused by having aggressive motives discovered is enough to provoke blushing.

According to Helz, women blush more often than men, which she attributes to age-old social taboos inhibiting the expression of female sexuality and aggression. Age may play a part, too. Behavior therapists agree. Adolescence usually is a peak time for blushing because teens are often in a near-constant state of anxiety and social discomfort. Typically, people learn to cope with their emotions better with age so that "blushability" may diminish over time.

How can someone for whom blushing is a problem be helped? The worst thing is to tease them, says Bellack. "What that person really needs is reassurance."

If you are the one who is recurrently red, Helz's advice is to try to ignore it: "The more you react to a blush, the more it will deepen."

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