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Botox: a Mask for Hiding Our Emotions – from Ourselves?

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As the mass of baby boomers age, it seems our society as whole becomes even more obsessed with holding onto youth, at all cost. Who'd even heard of 'E.D.' during the rocking '60s? But in our fixation with finding the fountain of youth, we might be facing some unintended consequences as we tone our abs and smooth our wrinkles.

A couple of psychological studies addressed the effects of a particular use of Botox, one of the prime weapons in the war against the calendar. The studies concerned a current theory in psychology called the "facial feedback" hypothesis. It holds that people rely on a feedback loop to recognize their own emotions; "reading" the feelings of their own facial expressions helps them to recognize that they are experiencing a particular emotion. So, for example, people frown because they are sad. But they also feel the sadness more fully and completely *because* they are frowning.

A study, conducted in 2010 by David Havis, looked at 40 people whose foreheads were injected with Botox; thus deactivating a pair of muscles that cause brow-wrinkling frowns. One result? The subjects were slower to understand sad and angry written statements. A vital element in their emotion-recognition feedback loop had been removed, impairing their ability to experience their emotions as fully as they had before the injections. The results of this study were confirmed by another study, conducted in 2011 by David Neal and Tanya Chartrand. The results of this research showed that Botox injections significantly impaired subjects' ability to perceive emotions accurately.

A very real ramification of disabling the facial feedback loop with Botox is that people will experience less sadness and anger. It's not that the condition prevents them from having these emotions, but it limits the feedback that people use to decipher their feelings. Taken a step further, disabling the facial feedback loop can also impair the ability to understand and be empathic to others' pain, because people perceive the pain of friends partly through their own empathic responses. Being less in touch with our own ability to feel pain makes us less able to respond empathically to the pain of those we care about.

As a clinical psychologist, I can tell you that there are many people who are already way out of touch with their emotions. And they struggle with this, even without Botox. With less awareness of negative emotions, people are missing an important inner signal that flags when something is upsetting – to themselves or others. Imagine being that much less in touch with your feelings after your boyfriend leaves you. Socially, imagine not being able to relate to a friend as she grieves over the death of a parent. If our ability to be empathic is impaired, so, too, is the ability to form healthy, supportive relationships. The long-term implications could include unhappiness, distress, or a gnawing feeling that something is terribly wrong – even if those feelings exist only below the surface of a superficially “happy” person’s wrinkle-free face.

Botox is not the demon here, nor its skin-smoothing effects. Looking younger can make you feel better. And, being a little less aware of sadness and anger at particular times can be helpful. But, I see a lesson in these research findings about the need to be careful in the goals we set for ourselves and how important it is for us to consider the long-term consequences of how aggressively we choose to pursue them.