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# Act of Kindness or Unwanted Opinion?

Are you the type of person who could suggest to a friend or loved one that whiter teeth or a straighter nose might improve their appearance? Like it or not, almost from the moment of birth each of us is judged – silently, unconsciously and nearly instantly – on our physical attractiveness. Gordon Patzer, author of *Looks—Why They Matter More Than You Ever Imagined*, calls appearance “a key factor in finding and keeping close friends, in choosing an occupation, in finding or keeping a job and in defining the limits of an individual’s success.”

So how far would you go to help someone look better? Steve Saenz, founder of Advisor Solutions Network, recalls being on the receiving end of unsolicited appearance advice. “At the not-so-tender age of 52, a friend said something that people seldom say. She told me to get my teeth fixed! I suppose most people would have been offended by this type of friendly advice but, to be honest, I was bewildered. It was not *what* she said that surprised me but the fact that no one had ever told me this before – not even my mother!”

Saenz heeded the suggestion. “Looking back, I am very grateful that my friend shared her thoughts about my appearance. I realize now that she

did this out of genuine concern. It takes guts to say something like that to another person. It also has to be delivered the right way. My friend couched her comments by saying, ‘Steve, people of means make time and make the investment in their teeth.’”

## PROCEED WITH CAUTION

Atlanta-based psychologist Roberta Golden underscores the importance of communicating respectfully and with sensitivity. “If you have a friend who may have a physical defect, real or imagined, it is especially important to be sensitive. Even if you have the best intention and want to be helpful to your friends, unsolicited advice or feedback may not be perceived as positive.”

According to Golden, gratuitous advice is typically viewed as a putdown or judgment. On the other hand, she says, if a friend shares that she is self-conscious and doesn’t like the color of her teeth, it may be appropriate to encourage her to take the first step toward improving her smile. Also, if you have personal experience with a procedure or product that helped you or a family member look or feel better, consider offering this to your friend. “However,” Golden cautions, “keep within the boundary of sharing and not advising when you talk about yourself.”

Kristin Callais, who has had a career in

both dental and plastic surgery practices, agrees. “Regardless of how close you are, you take a risk that the person may feel offended or embarrassed.” Nevertheless, she adds, “If I thought that the person trusted that I only had their best interest at heart I might make the suggestion.”

The idea of suggesting a physical change is very personal and potentially controversial. But disclosing your thoughts when you really care about someone can be rewarding, especially if the individual is unaware of a situation that, once improved, could have such a positive impact.

What’s the worst that can happen? You can get a response like, “My hair length and color are really none of your business,” “I like myself this way,” or “Thanks, but I think that space between my front teeth is part of my personality!”

## FIND THE RIGHT WORDS

If you are one of those people, like me, who just can’t help but impart unsolicited appearance-related advice, you may have better success if you follow a few ground rules. Start by inquiring if you might ask a rather personal question. Assuming you get an affirmative reply, try phrases like, “*You are such an attractive person, I wondered why you never sought treatment to minimize that mole on your nose?*” Or, “*You have such beautiful hair, have you*



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A CASUAL CONVERSATION WITH A TRUSTED FRIEND CAN OFTEN OPEN A DOOR TO HELPING SOMEONE LOOK OR FEEL BETTER ABOUT THEMSELVES.

*ever thought how fabulous you could look as a blond?"*

The key is to begin with a compliment before recommending your change. Based on his experience, Saenz explains how he would offer constructive criticism. "I would begin by asking for permission to offer feedback. I would then say that someone gave me similar feedback and that it helped me a lot."

Photos are a great way to bring up the topic, especially if you find one that demonstrates your point and resembles the esthetic problem your friend has. Use reference books to clarify your suggestion. My consumer book, *Change Your Smile* (Quintessence), now in its 4th edition, has helped many people better understand the possibilities and make informed decisions before spending

time and money to improve their smiles. Many dentists tell me that patients come to them, book in hand, and ask for treatments or recommendations based on what they have read or seen.

Magazines can be helpful as well. Recently on a flight back from Paris, I noticed our flight attendant had extremely dark and worn teeth. This aspect of her appearance was not only aging her, but it also kept others from focusing on the attractiveness of her face. Leafing through some magazines aboard the flight, I saw an image of a woman with unattractive and defective-looking crowns and bridges. Since I did not want to approach the flight attendant without an appropriate entree, I busied myself as I saw her approaching by looking at the photo. Eventually, she inquired about my

fascination with the image and revealed how dissatisfied she was with her own smile. This gave me the opportunity to explain how much better she could look with porcelain veneers or crowns. After our conversation, she expressed relief at knowing that a prettier smile was well within her reach.

Everyone has the right to look the way they prefer. You may or may not like someone's choice, and you may or may not choose to share your opinions. But if you do, remember that it's less often the message and more often how it's delivered that makes a difference. And what a difference it can make! Many times you'll be thanked and appreciated for caring enough to share, and it will be interpreted as an "act of kindness!"



WITH A LIFELONG INTEREST IN BEAUTY, DR. RONALD GOLDSTEIN CONDUCTS ONGOING RESEARCH ON THE PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS PHENOMENON AND ITS ROLE IN THE ACHIEVEMENT OF PERSONAL SUCCESS. HIS DENTAL PRACTICE WAS THE FIRST TO MOVE BEYOND THE SMILE AND FOCUS ON OVERALL FACIAL HARMONY. HE WRITES EXTENSIVELY FOR BOTH CONSUMERS AND THE DENTAL PROFESSION ON BEAUTY, ESTHETIC DENTISTRY AND RELATED TOPICS. DR. GOLDSTEIN IS THE AUTHOR OF THE 2-VOLUME TEXTBOOK, *ESTHETICS IN DENTISTRY* AND *CHANGE YOUR SMILE* (8 FOREIGN TRANSLATIONS), WHICH NOW IN ITS 4TH EDITION IS THE TOP-SELLING CONSUMER GUIDE TO DENTISTRY FOUND IN THOUSANDS OF DENTISTS' RECEPTION ROOMS AROUND THE WORLD. HE IS ON THE ADVISORY BOARD OF *NEW BEAUTY* MAGAZINE AND WRITES FOR IT AS WELL. HE IS THE FOUNDER OF TOMORROW'S SMILES, A NATIONAL NON-PROFIT FUND THAT HELPS DESERVING ADOLESCENTS RECEIVE LIFE-CHANGING SMILES THROUGH COSMETIC DENTISTRY. HIS MULTIDISCIPLINARY PRACTICE IS IN ATLANTA, GEORGIA.