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“HOW ARE YOU, REALLY?”



THE INSINCERE AMERICAN STEREOTYPE

One common perception* of the US is that everyone is insincere* or fake. This stereotype may come from differences in spoken language, body language, business culture and popular culture. But are Americans really insincere?

Auburn Scallon (USA)

“How Are You?”

One of the first examples that people often use to show American insincerity is the greeting “How are you?” Many people are taught that “it’s not a real question”, and some language teachers even tell students that the “correct” answer is always and only to say, “I’m fine.” I strongly disagree! However, the question is also not asking for a five-minute, detailed answer.

My best advice for answering “How are you?” is to be honest, but to keep it short. Someone having a really good day might say, “I’m amazing, thanks. How are you?” or “I’m great, thanks for asking.” Saying “I’m fine” is a neutral answer. You could always feel better (you could win the lottery, for example) and you could always feel worse (at least you haven’t just been hit by a car). “I’m fine” simply means there are no huge problems to solve before continuing this conversation. However, and this is very important, if you are having a bad day, you do *not* have to say “I’m fine.” Some people reply “I’m hanging in there*” or “I’ve been better” as a signal that they are not at their best, without giving all the details.

Short, honest answers can help the other person decide how to continue the conversation. I like to think of “How are you?” as a short version of “How would you like to be treated while we’re speaking?” To someone in a shop, it can show if you are interested in small talk or not. At work or school, saying “I’m hanging in there” can be a way to ask for some extra kindness without the pressure of explaining why. I would only expect follow-up questions

such as, “I’m sorry to hear that. What’s wrong?” from family or friends.

English is definitely not the only language to use a phrase more culturally than literally*. For example, the phrases “*Dovidenia*” in Slovak or “*Auf Wiedersehen*” in German are both similar to “See you later” or “Until we meet again.” However, these are used culturally to say “goodbye” with no promise of meeting the other person again. If the English “How are you?” makes us insincere, we’re not the only ones!

Employees are trained to keep a smile on their face, even when a customer is treating them badly.

Why Are You Smiling?

Another US behavior often called insincere is a constant smile, especially from people working in shops and restaurants. When people say this feels fake, they’re not completely wrong. However, there are real reasons why so many US workers are smiling.

US business culture is *very* focused on keeping customers happy, and often less worried about keeping employees happy. Employees in customer-service positions (restaurants, stores, hotels, movie theaters, etc.) are often trained to keep a smile on their face, even when a customer is treating them badly, because it’s better for business. Some managers even train their employees to smile when answering phones because they believe customers can hear a smile in their voice.

CONSTANT COMPLIMENTS

If you want to sound more American just give someone a compliment! A 1987 linguistics study found that American English uses compliments more often than most world languages. The most common forms are:

I like/love...

your dress/that hat/your new haircut.

That’s a really nice/great...

jacket/phone case/watch.

That restaurant/movie/book...

is so good/amazing.

Forced* smiles are especially common in US restaurants and bars. You can thank both economics and politics for that. The US federal minimum wage* says that all workers must make at least \$7.50 (about €6,3) per hour. However, a restaurant owner can pay their employees less than the minimum wage because servers should also receive tips from customers. The minimum wage for people who receive tips is different from state to state. For example, in Texas, Utah and Indiana, some servers make only \$2.13 (about €1,8) per hour before tips. On the other hand, in states like Washington, Oregon and California, restaurant workers must be paid around \$13–14 (€11–€11,8) per hour in addition to receiving any tips.

Servers need every customer to be happy when they get to paying the bill, especially in those lower-paid states – and that starts with a smile. A 1996 academic study found that US customers even tipped more when servers, especially women, wrote “thank you” and drew a smiley face on the check at the end of a meal. However, those smiles can definitely be insincere. A 2018 study found that around 90% of women working in bars, restaurants and hotels have experienced harassment* at work. They have to smile to make a living wage*, even when dealing with terrible customer behavior.

Strangely enough, US customers don’t all want to have fake friendly experiences either. In online reviews for any restaurant, two of the most common complaints include “Our server was really unfriendly” and “Our server was too friendly. I wish they would leave us to eat our meal in peace.” Finding the perfect balance of how much to smile and how friendly to be with customers, without doing too much, is like walking on a tightrope*.

DISCUSS

- Can you think of more reasons for the stereotype that Americans are insincere?
- Is your culture known for being more sincere or more friendly?
- How can you tell if a friendly person is being sincere or insincere?
- Do you prefer honesty, even if that means someone being grumpy (= in a bad mood, easily annoyed) or unfriendly?

GLOSSARY*

perception [pəˈsepʃn] – belief or opinion; how you view something

insincere [ˌɪnsɪnˈsiə(r)] – saying or doing something you don’t really mean

I’m hanging in there – (idiom) things aren’t good, but I’m surviving (imagine someone hanging from a tall tree – they are not falling, but they would prefer to be on the ground)

literally [ˈlɪtərəli] – using the original meaning of a word or phrase

forced [fɔːst] – done against your wishes

minimum wage – the lowest amount an employee can be paid per hour

harassment [ˈhærəsmənt] – behavior that upsets someone

living wage – enough money to pay for basic needs, such as rent and food

walking on a tightrope – (idiom) If you walk on a tightrope, you have to deal with a difficult situation and be very careful what you do