

QUARTERLY

Balancing Life, Work & Wellness

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Good Moods — and Bad — Are Infectious

We all know we can catch colds — but few of us realize we can catch emotions just as easily. Consider:

- ◆ You're in a perfectly good mood until you encounter your spouse in a blue funk — and suddenly your good mood evaporates.
- ◆ You're surrounded by laughing people in a movie theater — and you find yourself laughing along with them.
- ◆ Your baby starts to cry around other infants — and then the other babies join in, all of whom seemed perfectly happy just moments ago.

The fact is that our moods and emotions are easily affected by others. "The closer you are to someone, the more likely you are to be infected by their emotions," explains Elaine Hatfield, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of Hawaii, and co-author of the book, *Emotional Contagion*.



Studies show that people actually begin to mimic the facial expressions of those around them who are exhibiting strong feelings of joy, sadness, or anger, adds Dr. Hatfield.

Researchers say the ability to "catch" emotions starts a few months after we're born. Through our first year of life, studies show, we react to the pain of others as though we were feeling it ourselves.

Around age 1, we may realize the pain is someone else's, but we often continue to imitate the crying — perhaps, researchers say, in an effort to understand what another person is feeling.

Even at 2 to 2½ years old, we feel our own fingers to see if they hurt when someone else injures a finger. After this, children become better at discerning when pain is theirs or someone else's.

But we continue to "catch" emotions throughout our lives. "People talk about someone's infectious laughter or infectious personality because of the way their behavior affects others," says Mark H. Davis, PhD, professor of psychology at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, FL.

Married couples pick up the cues from one another immediately, says Ron Riggio, PhD, a pioneer in the study of whether emotions are catching.

"Even before we notice exactly what our spouse is saying, we'll tune in to their sad, slow-paced, low-pitched tone or their elated, fast-paced, high-pitched tone, and we'll notice whether their movements are slow, shoulders are slumped, and head is down, or if their carriage is upright and quick-paced," adds Dr. Riggio.

Who is most likely to catch emotions? Dr. Hatfield says to look for people who:

- ◆ Rivet their attention on others.
- ◆ See themselves in terms of how they relate to others.
- ◆ Can read others' emotional expressions, voices, gestures, and postures.
- ◆ Tend to mimic facial, vocal, and postural expressions.
- ◆ Recognize their own emotional responses.
- ◆ React emotionally.

"Older couples where there has been chronic illness are very susceptible," says Dr. Hatfield. "When a partner gets sick or is depressed about illness, the other spouse is more likely to feel depressed and even more likely to become mentally or physically ill."

Plot Your Own Emotional Rescue

Is there anything we can do to avoid being brought down by the emotions of others? The experts offer this advice:

- ◆ Try to help a person who is suffering, but going overboard won't help either of you. "Keep a little distance for yourself," says Dr. Davis. "It isn't selfish to go into the next room, read a newspaper, or call a friend on the telephone."
- ◆ Understand that you can't solve everyone's problems. "Frequently, the other person just wants to know that you understand and care. People usually don't expect you to fix it for them," says Dr. Hatfield.
- ◆ "If you find yourself slipping under the wave [of someone's emotions], try diverting your attention to something else," says Dr. Davis. "Turn your attention to a home project or play with the kids — do something that will cause your focus to shift to that thing."
- ◆ Keep in mind that reacting in some degree to others is good. "Try letting someone know that their good news is great to hear and that you share in their celebration," Dr. Davis says. "Or tell them, in the case of bad news, you're listening to their problem and empathize with their situation."
- ◆ When your feelings are confused, says Dr. Riggio, step back and ask yourself, "How much of this is them and how much is me; what's my role?" Don't let it become an emotional reaction in you.
- ◆ When things calm down, think about what went on, suggests Dr. Riggio. Understanding that we're reacting to someone else may help us the next time.

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