

EMOTIONAL CONTAGION

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Research shows how profoundly influenced we are by other people's affect states, from birth on, how rapidly our interpersonal affective responses occur, and how dynamically our physiology responds to others' affect states (Hatfield, Cacioppa et al. 1994). This information is conveyed not through language but through nonverbal communication that makes this system available to us even in the early stages of development. Infants only have nonverbal means of communication available

to them. Babies signal their distress by crying and mothers respond to this signal by administering care to the distressed babies. Such information exchange is vital if infants are to survive. But this emotional information exchange, or emotional resonance, does not stop in childhood. We are a supremely social species, and our survival has been dependent on our individual ability to mobilize the group. An individual scout, spotting danger, is able to convey this sense of imminent threat to the group through emotionally charged tone of voice, gesture, and facial expression. The necessity for such a response preceded the development of language and is well-organized, sophisticated, and easily transmitted.

We continue to resonate to each other's emotional experience throughout our lives. How many times have we said to a intimate partner, "It's not what you said that hurt me, it's the way you said it." The nonverbal components of speech (called "prosody") develop in parallel with language and are controlled by the nondominant hemisphere of the brain, the same hemisphere that appears to be activated during traumatic recall. But we are usually far less aware of the way we are saying things than what we are saying, although we are exceptionally skilled at perceiving those aspects of language, even outside of consciousness, and at responding to the nonverbal communication even more strongly than we do the verbal content.

We "catch" each other's emotions all the time. The more our attention is riveted on someone else, the more interrelated we are with someone else, the more we are able to read their nonverbal expressions, the better they are at expressing their feelings nonverbally, and the more stressful the situation, the more likely we are to catch other people's emotional experience. This describes many situations of highly charged group danger in which panic rapidly rises, or in which people appear to "hysterically" catch the symptoms of each other (Hatfield, Cacioppa et al. 1994). In such a state of danger, people will be in an altered state of consciousness, able to distort reality, easily susceptible to the contagious effect of emotion, and

open to the suggestion of someone else. For similar reasons, people can have an enormous positive influence on a highly aroused individual. If they can maintain clarity and calmness, this too can be contagious, thus reducing the other person's level of arousal both emotionally and physiologically. We actually have an enormous, underestimated, and often neglected role to play in other people's emotional lives.

Excerpt from Bloom, S. L. (1997). *Creating Sanctuary: Toward the Evolution of Sane Societies*

- [Link to Emotional Labor](#)
- [Link to Loss of Emotional Management](#)
- [Link to Commitment to Emotional Intelligence](#)

REFERENCES

Hatfield, E., J. T. Cacioppa, et al. (1994). Emotional Contagion. New York, Cambridge University Press.