SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

April 21, 2015 9:00 a.m.

Is There an Antidote for Emotional Contagion?

By Melissa Dahl Follow @melissadahl

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Several jobs ago, I sat next to a colleague who wasn't shy about expressing his by-the-minute emotions — particularly the negative ones. He aired his frustrations with loud expletives and *huff*s, and, after a while, I realized that my own shoulders were as scrunched up with stress as his. It was as if I'd caught his bad mood, like a nasty office cold.

It's something psychologists call emotional contagion, the idea that we really can and do "catch" emotions from the people around us. A 2008 study, for example, showed that happiness spreads throughout a social network sort of like an infection; when a nearby friend of yours becomes happy, it increases your own chance of happiness by 25 percent, found James H. Fowler and Nicholas A. Christakis. Mostly, the research has focused on the cheerier, pro-social consequences of emotional contagion, because feeling what the people around us feel seems to increase empathy and understanding, thereby improving communication, according to work by the University of Hawaii's Elaine Hatfield, considered one of the leaders in this field.

But the contagion effect isn't always a positive thing, particularly when the emotions you're catching are negative. Some research has touched on this, too, suggesting that college students whose roommates are depressed are more likely to become depressed themselves, for instance.

So is there a way to protect yourself from feeling what the people around you feel? Is there, in other words, an antidote to emotional contagion?

If there is, it may be particularly useful for those in some of the most emotionally exhausting professions, like nursing and therapy, said Daniel Rempala, a psychologist at the University of Hawaii, who in 2013 published a paper exploring this question. An unfortunate but common side effect for jobs with a heavy emphasis on care-giving is the kind of long-term job stress known as burnout; one study of nurses at a Midwestern hospital found that those who cared the most about their patients were the ones who tended to burn out the fastest.

As a college student, Rempala got a small glimpse of this. He was working at a crisis hotline, fielding calls from people dealing with major traumas and mental-health problems. "I did that job for about a year, and then I realized I couldn't do it anymore," said Rempala. "I basically experienced an accelerated case of burnout."

Rempala later switched his career aspirations from clinical psychology to research, and, years later, the memory of the crisis center experience inspired a research project exploring whether it was possible to avoid catching others' emotions. The answer, according to his findings: Kind of, yes!

Rempala first asked real people (as in, not actors) to record videos of themselves talking about the saddest and happiest days of their lives. Then he showed those videos to another group of people, who were to pretend that they were this videotaped person's therapist. As they listened, some of the participants were instructed to simply reflect on what their "client" was experiencing; others were instructed to place themselves in the person's shoes. A third group was told to listen, but remain detached. "Picture yourself, the room, the TV, and the person on the TV screen as though you were an outside observer," they were told.

After watching the videos, all the participants rated how happy or sad they were feeling. They also wrote a few sentences about the way they'd respond to the person were they really his or her therapist; a separate group later read those responses and evaluated how empathetic and genuine they were. "Much to my surprise, the one that ended up being the most effective in reducing the contagion and the most effective in aiding the interaction was dissociation," Rempala said of his study results. (Interestingly, sadness seemed to be more infectious than happiness overall.)

It makes intuitive sense that taking a third-party view, and thereby removing yourself from the situation (at least in your own mind) might protect you from picking up on the feelings of others, but it is indeed surprising that taking this perspective still allows you to at least appear empathetic and genuine. Rempala didn't offer an explanation for this finding, but it's not too difficult to puzzle out. Maybe taking an outsider's perspective when considering another person's emotions helps amp up your empathy precisely *because* you've taken yourself out of the equation; this way, your own experiences and feelings are less likely to cloud your response to someone else's issues.

That said, Rempala argues that this advice is probably best for those in the emotionally draining jobs mentioned earlier. For the rest of us, Rempala said, "I don't think burnout is a huge issue with a person in their average life — it's not like when your sister's on the phone complaining about her day at work you really need to dissociate from that," or else risk extreme stress and exhaustion.

Fair enough. It’s certainly not that dire of an issue if some acquaintance’s bad attitude brings you down sometimes. But it’s still not a very pleasant day-to-day experience. Luckily, there are other ways to likely minimize the unpleasantness, said Sigal Barasade, a researcher at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, who has been studying emotional contagion for more than 20 years, ever since she had a similar office experience to mine.

“There was this woman, I didn’t even report to her, but she was on my same floor,” Barsade said. “And she was just so intense and negative all the time.” And then one day, she went on vacation. “I literally felt my shoulders lower — the whole department felt more relaxed and happy,” she said. “Then she came back, and it all got bad again.” And thus, a research obsession was sparked.

Based on her decades of research, Barsade came up with some strategies that should work to limit your susceptibility to emotional contagion. (None of these, however, have been explicitly tested, so take the following with the requisite grains of salt.)

Barsade suggests:

Distract yourself. As much as you can, try not to even let this person cross your line of vision. “Basically, what my research has shown is that emotional contagion relies a lot on attention,” she said. “And we focus more on the people who are negative. So one thing you can do is to avoid even looking at them.” A pair of giant headphones always helps.

Launch a counter-attack. Barsade’s research has suggested that one of the most contagious emotions may be calmness, or serenity. "[Y]ou can try to talk calmly, and smile gently, and maybe *you'll* change *their* mood," she added, although no one has ever done a study on battling moods.

Or just, you know, talk to the person. Try simply telling the person their terrible attitude is rubbing off on you, because, as Barsade pointed out, "if someone is really negative and upsetting the environment, a lot of times they don’t really know that." Face-to-face communication: the most awkward but often the most effective course of action.