

Mirror Neurons

There is no doubt that how we feel is influenced by the people around us. However, most people do not how powerful those influences are. Our brain is designed to learn from others and mirror those around us (referred to as social learning). In fact, in our brains we have what is called mirror neurons, which fire when we observe actions performed by another, triggering us to engage in the same action. For example, our physical body will mimic someone else when we observe the person crossing their legs or yawning. Have you ever heard that “yawns are contagious”? Mirror neurons is why.

More importantly, our brain assesses others’ emotional states and then reflects or mimics what is observed, influencing how we feel. This is empathy. Some of us are more influenced than others’ emotions than others, depending on our level of empathy. You may have noticed that when someone you know is extremely excited it makes you excited. Or perhaps you’ve found that when you talk to someone who is depressed, you walk away feeling sad.

Emotions are contagious. This is incredibly important to understand!

So, how powerful is this influence? In 2000, the journal *Psychological Science* published a study in which participants were found to be influenced by seeing an image for just 30 milliseconds. This is not enough time for participants to see the image *consciously* (being aware of what they’re seeing) but their unconscious minds could interpret the image and react to it. In the experiment, participants were shown a face with either a happy, angry, or a neutral expression. Since it was for only 30 milliseconds, they were not aware of what expression they were being exposed to. When they were shown images displaying happiness, their bodies reacted by increasing electrical activity in the muscles needed to smile. This also happened for those exposed to images of anger. What is powerful is that participants were seeing the images for just 30 milliseconds. Now, imagine the impact that the people around you who are expressing a strong emotional state can have on your body’s reaction!

Another study that was published in the journal *PLOS One* found that we are also influenced by observing another person experiencing physical sensations. In the study, they showed participants videos of a hand that is placed into either visibly cold or visibly warm water. They found that the participants’ hand temperature actually changed based on what they saw in the video. When participants saw someone put their hand in cold water, their hand dropped in temperature. These studies, among many others, truly demonstrate that those around us can influence us at a deep level.

So, ask yourself, who is influencing you? Who do you interact with frequently?

What emotional state do they tend to be in?

What can you do to limit your exposure to those who may negatively influence your emotions?

How can you surround yourself with more people that will mirror an emotional state that you want to experience more of?