



# *catching*

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A REASON  
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AS IT TURNS  
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ARE OUR  
OWN

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# *feelings*

**Y**ou know that nagging sense of anxiety you can't quite put a finger on, or that bad mood that keeps getting worse because you can't identify the cause (you've even checked the calendar: it's not PMS and none of the planets are in retrograde)? It might not have been yours to begin with.

Just as we pass on germs to the people closest (in proximity and otherwise) to us, we also share and contract one another's feelings in a phenomenon known as emotional contagion. Instagram's favourite illustrator Julie Houts (@jooleeloren) recently posted a visual representation of this: a hand waving (labelled "Me") from underneath a pile of dirt (labelled "Your bullshit") and a smiley-face balloon floating away (labelled "My good day"). Psychologist, researcher and author Dr Lea Waters explains emotional contagion this way: "It's basically the catching of someone else's mood. You absorb another person's emotion, and it causes you to lose your own mood and your own sense of perspective. Emotional contagion

happens at a very subconscious level, and it's a deeply primal, evolutionary process that's been programmed into us."

Human beings are really good at subconsciously scanning their conversational partner's face for clues as to whether they're enjoying the chat, how they're feeling in general and whether they're telling the truth. In the past, being able to read the emotions of our tribe members was crucial for survival, and while that's obviously less relevant today, we still need some level of emotional synchrony to understand the people around us. Emotional contagion occurs when we add to these mind-reading skills by mimicking the person we're talking to.

"In your brain, there's what's called mirror neurons," says Cindy Nour, director of MindFrame Psychology in Sydney. "They tend to fire when you see or anticipate a particular action and they mimic the same thing in you." We mimic the facial and vocal expressions (ever picked up an accent that's not yours?), as well as body language, postures and

movements of those around us. We rarely realise we're doing this. The muscle fibres in our faces essentially have minds of their own and are carrying on while we remain unaware. This is where facial feedback theory comes in. "Emotions are a two-way street," says Waters. "How we feel on the inside influences our facial expressions, but our expressions also influence our emotions." Research has shown that when you smile, the movement is enough to communicate to your brain that you're in a good mood. So it stands to reason that if you're mimicking someone's frown, you're signalling to your brain that you're in a bad mood, and so it begins.

Sometimes it's obvious: you'll feel sad when you talk to someone who is sad; confident when you speak to someone who is confident. But then there are times when you'll come away from a pleasant-enough conversation with a feeling of anxiety or awkwardness that wasn't there before. It can be easy to launch a full-scale self-assessment to determine the source and resolve that you probably said something stupid and you shouldn't be allowed to talk to people anymore. In actual fact, your conversation partner could have been trying to hide their own anxiety, but you've unwittingly picked up on their microexpressions, which have clone-stamped the same feeling into you.

"Our bodies can't use words, but they're constantly communicating to us through changes to pressure and temperature, making you heavy in your shoulders, constricted across your throat – or the opposite," says Waters. But it runs even deeper than that. "Science has shown that we become synchronous in terms of our nervous systems, too," she adds. "When we start to mimic the other person and take on their facial expressions and posture, our heart rate changes and so does our skin temperature and our brain waves." In this way we are like car indicators in traffic, all blinking to our own rhythm and occasionally flashing in synchrony, if only for a few moments.

We are especially likely to mimic the facial expressions of the people we like and love. While everyone can probably think of one person who comes into work and brings the whole mood down, repeatedly catching the bad moods of the people we love can blind us to the contagion. These are relationships founded on emotions, says Waters. "The closer the person is to you, the stronger the emotional contagion." Nour agrees: "It's easier to take on their feelings if you know the person well; if you are familiar with how they act or behave."

Unfortunately, negative emotions are more infectious than positive ones because they're linked to survival instincts: fear (run!), disgust (don't eat that), sadness (help me). Extroverted personalities send stronger signals and are less likely to be affected by people around them who show different emotions to their own, while highly sensitive, introverted types are more likely to pick up on someone's signals and be overrun by a feeling that is not theirs. Women are also more susceptible to taking on other people's feelings.

Psychotherapist Dr Elaine Hatfield started researching emotional contagion in the '90s after realising she was contracting the feelings of her clients. In a report published in *Psychology Of Women Quarterly*, Hatfield and her team found evidence that due to "traditional gender roles", women were more often socialised to notice the emotional needs of others and are therefore more vulnerable to absorbing the negativity of those around them. "We're trained from a young age to be sensitive to what others are feeling," Hatfield said. "Men usually aren't, but that's changing."

Second-hand emotions, such as stress, can have the same health effects on your body as the direct emotion. The brain interprets it as one and the same, which is why it is important to hone your self-regulation skills in order to inoculate yourself against bad moods. Waters has some advice: "Firstly, be aware that this is a real phenomenon and give it legitimacy. Secondly, tune into what's happening to you. How does your body respond when there are certain people in the room?" If you feel tense when with a family member, but feel your mood lifting when you're away from them, that's a clue that there may be a deeper problem in your relationship. But it doesn't mean we should only surround ourselves with perennially sunny people: everyone's allowed their moods.

"I don't want to advocate that if someone makes you feel bad, you should ditch that relationship," Waters says. "What you have to do is look at behaviour over time. If that person consistently makes you feel bad, then I'd question the relationship. But if you're in a long-term relationship and most of the time your partner makes you feel good, but every now and again they come to you in a bad mood, realise that's part of being in a relationship."

Acknowledging where emotions came from is one way to avoid emotional contagion, but make sure you take responsibility for your own feelings. If it was your mood first, how can you make sure you don't pass it on? "Awareness is the hack," says Waters. "Emotional contagion is a subconscious process, so as soon as we communicate to someone that we're not having a great day, we break the potential for the contagion because we've made it conscious." So all those times you think you've fooled everyone into thinking you're in a good mood, you've probably been spreading your bad mood germs everywhere.

Make a commitment to yourself that you'll be a harbinger for positivity. "Once you're tuned into emotional contagion, you can use it to help people who aren't doing so well, and to improve your own mood," says Waters. "Think of small things you can do to be that positive agent. It's not about ignoring where you're at – don't force yourself if you're not having a great day. But if that's the case, have the awareness to recognise that and communicate it to someone to break the spell. Once you become aware of it, it's like a superpower you unlock." E

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