

# Why Stress Is Contagious



Even the most independent soul is born to conform. When others laugh, our mouths upturn into smiles. When the person next to you yawns, chances are you're going to break off a tonsil-rattling exhale too. And when your stressed-out colleague is demanding a meeting right now, the alarmed face quickly incites yours to mimic it. Now you're stressed too.

So much for free will. We all have a copycat streak, thanks to social circuitry that makes us yawn and panic when others do. As a social animal, we are built to relate to others, so much so that we physically reflect back their expressions and movements. The urge to echo is triggered by what are known as mirror neurons, brain cells that mimic the actions or emotions of others. While they help the species learn, understand, and bond, they can also be your undoing when the channeled behavior is the emotional contagion of stress.

Mirror neurons were first identified in the 1990s by Italian scientists studying how the brain controls mouth and hand movements in macaques. Researchers found that a distinct batch of cells lit up when the monkeys performed or even observed specific movements.

Mirror neurons are thought to operate similarly in humans. Located near motor neurons responsible for movement, speech, and intention to act, they simulate the actions and emotions of others or give us the impulse to do so—thus, one of life's great mysteries, the contagious yawn. You're not remotely sleepy, but you cut loose with a jaw-popper after the person next to you has done the same.

A study in Switzerland using fMRI scans found a connection between the mirror neuron system and higher cognitive empathic functions. When subjects in the study were shown photos of people yawning, a region in the mirror neuron system was activated.

Even if we're not physically imitating what we see, mirror neurons still fire off a simulated version of the activity in your head as if you actually did it. It's all designed to help us learn, understand, empathize, and connect with what others are doing and feeling. Too often, though, what's mirrored is the stress of coworkers, managers, and significant others.

Researchers have long known about the infectious nature of stress. Pass-along strain runs rampant in relationships and work settings. Studies have shown that there is "crossover" stress from one spouse to the other, between coworkers, and "spillover" from the work domain to home. The stress contagion effect, as it's known, spreads anxiety like a virus. Our mirror neurons help suck us into the emotional eruptions of

others.

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Emotions are highly contagious, and that can be highly dangerous when the emotional storms of others reflexively trigger the stress response in us. Stress is a factor in five out of the six leading causes of death, according to the CDC.

Stress suppresses the immune system, lowers the good cholesterol, increases the bad, and leaves decision-making up to a hysterical corner of your ancient brain that can't compute the social stressors of the modern world. It can lead to any number of illnesses and conditions, from insomnia, to cardiovascular disease, to heart attacks. It's a national health emergency that kills more people than traffic accidents or nicotine and could be alleviated with proactive stress screening, advice doctors seldom prescribe.

But you don't have to buy anyone else's stress—or the alarms of your own overwrought stress response, which are equally false (unless you are in a true life-or-death moment). The key to resisting the emotional contagion of stress is overriding the double-team autopilot of the stress response—reacting before you think—and your mirror neurons. When someone dumps emotional toxins on you, you can choose not to accept the incoming by catching yourself when the bogus, catastrophic story of stress goes off and activates a wave of stupefying emotion. Instead of latching on to the fear or panic because it's in your head, contest it by reframing the irrational story to what's actually the reality. You are not about to die, as the clueless ancient brain thinks.

Stress is the result of the story we tell ourselves. That requires that we

dispute the stress of the addled colleague who expects an instant response to her email. She will hear from you—when you're able. Refuse the frenzy of someone else's deadline by stepping back and identifying the real story—it's not an emergency, it's not your stress, it's not a crisis—and by using proven stress management processes, from progressive relaxation to meditation, to turn off the false danger signal. Instead of mirror neurons reflecting stress, you can use them as a tool to better understand why a person is going off, and, as a result, why you don't have to.

We can let others know that we would prefer to be dealt with in a way that doesn't treat every event as *Apocalypse Now* or threaten our health. Others don't know they're as much of a conduit for stress as a fiber optic cable is for data. Let them know. Reduce the interactions you can with the stress conductors in your life. And put a selection of photos on your computer or smartphone of people in the act of yawning to use your mirror neurons to treat the false alarms of others with the response they deserve.