
Stress Contagion Article

We know stress is universal. We all get stuck in our high zones or low zones at some point. Yet we also know that what activates stress differs from person to person.

We know that if we get stuck in our high zone or low zone, we want relief. We want to find a way to feel better. But sometimes we make choices that are less productive or less healthy than others. We might shout at someone or criticize someone. We might engage in risky behavior or consume a substance that makes us feel better temporarily, but that isn't good for us in the long run.

Science shows us that animals do the same thing. They have nervous systems very similar to ours. Like us, they have an autonomic nervous system that responds to danger and safety and that responds to sensations. One thing scientists have noticed is that animals can exhibit displaced aggression when they are threatened or stressed.

Let's say a rat or a chimpanzee is being bullied by a larger rat or larger chimpanzee. It can't fight back, because it's smaller. So what does it do? Its body is getting so stressed out. It's getting stuck in its high zone. Its body is being flooded by stress hormones. And it's feeling powerless, helpless, frustrated or angry.

One thing the rat or chimpanzee might do is go and find a smaller rat or chimpanzee. Then it bullies that smaller rat or chimpanzee. It couldn't fight against the bigger one, but by picking on the smaller one, it feels less helpless, less powerless. It feels more powerful, more in control. That makes it feel safer. "See? I'm not so weak! I can bully someone else!"

You might think that animals can't feel this way. We don't know what that animal is thinking when it goes and bullies a smaller animal. But we do know that it relaxes a bit after doing that. It has let off some aggression. Scientists call this "displaced aggression." That's because it's not aiming at the target that caused the problem; it's aiming at someone or something else.

But what's the problem with this? Now that smaller animal is also being bullied and is feeling stressed, helpless, and angry. If it goes and bullies another smaller animal, then the chain of violence goes on and on.

But scientists have also noticed that there's something else the first victim animal can do. Instead of exhibiting displaced aggression, it can find an animal it likes — like a mate or a member of its family.

Stress Contagion Article *(continued)*

The animals then groom each other by. Both rats and chimpanzees groom each other. In fact, most mammals do. By grooming, they relax each other. The animal still lets off steam, but it hasn't gone and harmed anyone else.

We don't use the term "grooming" for this behavior with people. But maybe you've noticed friends combing each other's hair. Probably you've received a hug when you were feeling down, or you've offered a hug to someone else. These are activities that we do as human beings that fall into the same category. Even if we show displaced aggression towards something like a pillow, by punching it, that can be a lot better than displacing it onto another person. (Mister Rogers often said he would bang on piano keys when he got angry, and that that helped him.)

We know certain responses are healthier or more appropriate in certain circumstances than others. Some behaviors continue the cycle of stress; others bring us back into our resilient zone.

By learning about our nervous system, we now have awareness. That awareness gives us more choice. But what happens when we see others who do not have awareness? Let's say we see someone who has been bullied. They are stressed. They're stuck in their high or low zones. Their bodies are uncomfortable. But they don't realize what's going on.

Then we see them engage in displaced aggression. They go and bully a smaller child at school. They've never heard about the resilient zone. They've never learned to pay attention to their body. They don't know that there are other things they could do to calm themselves down and make themselves feel safer. All they know is that showing aggression to someone else is making them feel better right now. But by doing so, they're only creating more problems for themselves. If they continue, they could lose friends or even be kicked out of school.

Does our awareness change the way we view that person? Does it allow us to have more compassion for them?

Our first question was about how awareness changes the way we view others' behavior. Let's turn to the second question: does our awareness change the way we behave towards each other, when we realize we're impacting each other's nervous systems?

Stress Contagion Article *(continued)*

If I'm stressing you out, I know I'm pushing you towards your high or low zone. I know that by causing you stress, I'm causing your body to flood with the stress hormone cortisol. I'm causing your immune system to activate, increasing inflammation and releasing proteins (cytokines) that are meant to fight disease, but that can damage your body. I'm pushing you to a place where you won't be making good decisions, where you could feel confused, agitated, upset. Do I really want to do that?

Even if I'm not intentionally stressing you out, if I am out of my resilient zone, just being stuck in my high zone or low zone could impact you. If you take a stringed instrument, like a guitar, violin, or piano, and you strike one string, it vibrates. But what happens to the strings next to that one? They start to vibrate a bit too. The movement in one string affects those other ones nearby. This is sympathetic resonance.

Our nervous systems are like that too. We share this same kind of sympathetic resonance. Can you think of someone who makes you feel calmer just by your being with them? What about someone who tends to make you feel agitated, because they seem so agitated themselves? When someone's really angry, does it make you feel relaxed to be with them? Or do you feel a bit tense?

Scientists have long noticed that we have "emotion contagion." We pick up on each other's emotions because we resonate with each other, even on an unconscious level. When someone is outside of their resilient zone, we've learned that it affects every organ of their body. So their eyes will look different, their breathing will be different and their tone of voice will be different. The way they're standing will be different; their muscles will be tensed differently. Our own body's nervous system picks up on all of that, and it affects us.

Conversely, if someone is really in their resilient zone, feeling a lot of safety and well-being, we feel that too. Their groundedness can help ground us. Their voice sounds soothing to us. Their face is welcoming. Their smile is encouraging. We feel more at ease and we ourselves feel safer just being beside them. Have you ever felt that way about someone?

So our awareness can impact the way we behave towards each other. And we notice that by taking care of ourselves, and making sure we are in our resilient zones, we are having a positive impact on others, even without "trying."