

Other People's Stress: It's Contagious, But it Doesn't Have to Bring You Down

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As a tax preparer, Stephen Yu deals with clients who can't locate records or are panicked because they haven't filed in years. Unfortunately, Yu picks up on their stress and sometimes takes it home, especially during tax season. He becomes irritable, distracted and can't sleep. "My family gets stressed, too, because they're worried about me," admitted Yu, of San Jose.

From Yu's clients, to Yu, to his family: If we were talking about symptoms of a fast-spreading virus, officials with the Centers for Disease Control might be dispatching scientists in biohazard suits.

Instead, the culprit is stress. It has been identified as one of the major scourges of our modern age. Seventy-eight percent of American adults say their stress levels increased or stayed the same over the past five years, according to a 2013 American Psychological Association report. And more than 30 percent say stress has had a significant impact on their physical and mental health. **Consequences of chronic untreated stress range from decreased immune system function to insomnia to increased risk of heart disease.**



To get to the bottom of why we're all so stressed out, some researchers have focused on how anxiety can be as contagious as any airborne pathogen. Researchers also liken it to secondhand smoke as they consider how regular exposure to challenging people hurts us physically and emotionally.

Consider how someone else's negativity can put you on edge. There's the co-worker who constantly complains. The friend who calls to vent about her marriage. The sighing, toe-tapping, visibly impatient customer in line with you at the grocery store.

Philosophers and psychologists have long pondered the ways people wittingly or not influence other's emotions. Their curiosity makes sense, considering that humans are "fundamentally social creatures," said Dr. David Spiegel. He is the director of the Center on Stress and Health at Stanford University's School of Medicine, which studies the effects of stress on mental and physical health.

In trying to document the extent to which we are susceptible to "emotional contagion," researchers are using sophisticated methods to locate exactly where stress develops in people's bodies. **While we may think of stress as purely emotional, doctors know it churns up complex physiological reactions that involve the nervous, endocrine and immune systems.**



In a St. Louis University experiment, 20 students watched others struggle to present speeches or perform arithmetic problems. The researchers then measured the levels of cortisol and a stress-related salivary enzyme in both the speakers and the student observers. The team found that the observers' stress responses were "proportional" to the speakers' responses.

Tony Buchanan, associate professor of St. Louis University's Department of Psychology, was surprised at how much witnesses were unsettled by the speakers' discomfort. **"It was also surprising how easily the stress was transmitted,"** he said. Another 2014 study by researchers at UC San Francisco and New York University found that babies immediately reacted to the stress of mothers who had just participated in an exercise designed to make them anxious.

While babies played with caregivers in one room, the mothers gave an impromptu speech to a panel of people. A third of the 69 mothers in the study faced panelists who responded with scowls. After the mothers returned to their babies, the heart rates of mothers and babies were measured. The increased heart rates of the agitated moms were mirrored in their babies, even if the moms tried to mask their distress with smiles and soothing voices, said Sara Waters, a postdoctoral fellow at UCSF focusing on development psychology. **But it doesn't take being in the same room with someone you know to be brought down by someone else's negativity, as Facebook found with its controversial experiment on how "emotional contagion" spreads via social networks.**

For one week, the site's data scientists programmed an algorithm to automatically omit content that contained words associated with either positive or negative emotions from the central news feeds of nearly 700,000 users. The study showed that reducing positive content in users' news feeds reduced the positive content users in turn posted in their status updates.

As alarming as it can be to learn that we're so easily ruffled by others, secondhand stress is not always a bad thing. In fact, it often confers benefits to individuals and societies, experts say. One point of the St. Louis study was to demonstrate people's capacity for empathy. The observers may have felt discomfort, but that emotional state can inspire altruism. **"In natural disasters and terrorist events, a lot of people will be running toward the victims to help them," Buchanan said.** "That's a situation where everyone is under stress, but a significant group of people are drawn to help others."

Because we're wired to be sensitive to other people, secondhand stress "allows us to be connected to other people, for good and for bad," said Spiegel. Much of his research at Stanford has focused on whether support groups improve the quality of life of breast cancer patients.

Certainly, women in those groups are exposed to heartbreaking stories about members in pain, lacking family support or learning their prognosis isn't good. But those women can also benefit from comforting those in need and even learning that their situation isn't so dire. "It can be hurtful to lose someone in the group, but at the same time, they can feel good about offering help and feel lucky to still be alive," Spiegel said. For the babies in Waters' experiment, their acute sensitivity to their mothers' distress probably signals a healthy evolutionary adaptation -- relying on their mothers' emotional cues to know if an environment is safe.

But Waters acknowledges the growing body of research suggesting that chronically stressed-out parents could hurt their children's development, especially of young children or babies in utero.

She hopes that work like hers provides child-care experts with data they can use to develop coping strategies for parents and their kids. "I think that's one of the things we're starting to explore is the extent to which parents can start to pay attention to stress inside the body and help themselves and their children to bring those stress levels down, by doing deep breathing or other calming exercises."

Because stress is a part of daily life, it never helps to avoid or deny it, Spiegel said. This is particularly true if you're concerned about spreading your worries to people close to you. For one thing, your friends and family will notice if you seem down, and kids often spin that observation into the fear that they have done something wrong.

"With partners it's a balance," he said. "You can't let your stress take over your relationship, but you won't have a relationship if you can't share what's troubling you." As for children, he said, they need to see parents model healthy ways for navigating life's ups and downs.



Santa Clara University psychology professor Thomas Plante agrees we can't entirely eliminate secondhand stress, but we can become more discerning about how much we allow certain people and situations into our lives. "We absorb the dysfunction of those around us if we aren't careful," he said.

Understanding how easily stress passes from one person to another underscores the importance of reducing our own stress so that we don't be "stress carriers" ourselves, Plante said.

As for Yu, he does his best to help his clients face the financial and emotional fallout of their money and tax ordeals. At the same time, he's learning not to take their situations too personally. And, he says he is doing a better job of communicating with his family, adding that maybe one day he'll take up their suggestion that he try meditation.

- **Mindful meditation**, prayer and positive self-talk can reduce some of the "drama" that surrounds you and can lessen the chance of becoming a "stress carrier" yourself.
- **Stay healthy** through exercise, good nutrition and sleep; resist overeating or abusing alcohol and other substances.
- If you're worried about anything, **keep the lines of communication open** with people you trust; don't isolate yourself.
- **While you shouldn't over-share with your kids, don't shield them** from the fact you're going through difficult times.
- Focus on situations with other people you can change; **reduce or end your involvement in situations you can't.**
- **Be helpful to others.**

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