Why Calmness Can Be Contagious

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When the three-year-old Abby Perry was babysitting erupted into a tantrum about a toy he wanted to play with, Perry’s first instinct was to discipline him and remind him to share. “Then I thought, what would the point be?” she says. “This little boy was shrieking and unsettled, in a house he’d never visited, being cared for by a family he didn’t know.”

Perry recalled a method she read about in a book called *The Connected Child*, which recommended drawing near to a distressed child and waiting until they calmed down enough to talk. “I slid my pregnant self down the pantry door and just sat on the floor next to him – several inches away at first, then progressively closer as he started to notice my presence and seemed to want to calm down,” she says.

The toddler’s writhing body slowly settled as Perry calmly and silently sat with him. Eventually, she says, he was willing to talk. The two worked out a plan for sharing, and the day went on.

The interaction between Perry and the child is an example of *co-regulation*, which is the ability to alter one’s emotional and physiological state in response to another
person’s behavior. It’s also a common topic of discussion in modern parenting books. It’s the theory behind why a distressed infant without self-soothing skills immediately settles in the arms of a nurturing caretaker, and why the child Perry was babysitting benefitted from her calm and close presence.

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Humans are hardwired for connection. The brain relies on input from others — this includes unspoken input, like a gentle touch or a warm smile — to shape emotional and physical experiences. Whether people know it or not, they’re constantly borrowing from other people’s nervous systems and lending out their own.

“There’s an obvious contagious effect with our emotional and cognitive experiences; we’re constantly affected by others and their emotional states,” says Anna Lembke, professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Stanford University School of Medicine. “That’s the function of families and tribes; we’re not people meant to be in isolation from one another.”

How, exactly, people’s nervous systems communicate is still being researched. Maine-based therapist Deb Dana, believes this exchange happens through what’s called neuroception, an automatic process by which the nervous system detects cues of safety and danger, and triggers biological changes accordingly. If another person is anxious or angry, for example, your heart might begin to race in preparation for
fight-or-flight, or if a person makes eye contact that your brain perceives as warm and inviting, you might feel calm and connected. In this way, the physical effects of other peoples’ emotions are literally contagious.

“Neuroception is like our internal surveillance system, which is always sensing into each other’s energy and experience,” says Dana. “My nervous system is trying to sense from your tone of voice if you’re safe to engage with or not. This happens without our awareness, but we may feel the outcome of it when something changes in our biology.”

The mother-child relationship is a hallmark example of co-regulation, and is rooted in a long-standing psychology concept called attachment theory, which emphasizes the importance of the parent-child bond as a basis for emotional development. But there’s also newer research about specific networks in the body that could be involved in the connection between interpersonal relationships and nervous system regulation.

One possibility is the renowned neuroscientist Stephen Porges’ polyvagal theory. The concept hones in on the function of the vagus nerve, which wanders through the body starting from the brain stem (the part of the brain focused on survival, safety, and danger). According to the theory, the vagus, which influences the heart, lungs, and digestive tract, overlaps with a neural network that controls body language like eye contact and facial expression. So when someone smiles or sneers at us, we first experience it physically, then the vagus nerve sends a message to our brains, which tells us to feel either calm or safe.
People’s nervous systems scan for signals of safety automatically and subconsciously, but Dana says people can also intentionally use their own regulated (in other words, calm) nervous systems to help another person move from a state of anxiety or stress to a state of calm and connection. Basically, one person’s regulated nervous system reminds another person’s that it’s possible to calm down. “If you are dysregulated and I am regulated, I can use my regulated nervous system to offer you cues of safety that you’ve lost contact within your own nervous system,” Dana says.

How is this done? Most commonly, it happens through body language cues and vocalization. Colorado-based psychologist Arielle Schwartz says this exchange occurs commonly in the therapist-client relationship, where researchers believe a calm, empathetic therapist can function as an “auxiliary cortex,” or an external sense of safety, for a dysregulated client. A therapist’s warm tone of voice and eye gaze can bring a client’s brain to a place where they can think logically instead of being overwhelmed by physical responses to stress.

In addition to creating an environment the client perceives as “safe,” a therapist’s empathetic response can also communicate to the client that it’s possible to hash through a painful memory without panicking – because the therapist can communicate the client’s traumatic experience without being overwhelmed herself. “To have someone welcome what you’re bringing without being frightened by it can be deeply calming,” says Schwartz.

The same principle can hold true outside of the therapist’s office. By extending compassionate eye contact or simply sitting next to someone who is struggling with physical
effects from a strong emotion — as Perry did with the child she was babysitting — people can create non-threatening and productive connections. “If you go home from work and you’re keyed up because you had a disagreement with a co-worker, what’s the most calming thing from your partner? You just want to be heard and held,” says Schwartz.

While the science behind co-regulation is becoming much better understood, as it stands, there are still a number of theories around exactly why our nervous systems react to each other the way they do. And Lembke says we’re far from understanding how the brain works. Even so, the principle of co-regulation is still valuable for general health and well-being.

“What’s deeply true is that we are a society disconnected from our bodies,” Lembke says. “Any way we can reconnect with our physical selves, and remember that we’re animals who respond with instinctive reactions, helps us manage our bodies and emotions.”

(Source: Medium.com)