

Emotional contagion seems to be one of those buzz concepts thanks to an infamous Facebook study. Emotional contagion is when two or more people synch in to each other emotionally but are not consciously aware that the other persons emotions are also affecting themselves. A good example is when we first fall in love, our behaviours, emotions and thoughts often are in synch with the other person. Its as if one persons emotions rubs off on the other and they then experience similar emotions. Emotional contagion is a reasonably well documented phenomenon.

It is important to note that the term is not saying we are only affected by other people's mood - for instance, if someone is in a bad mood, we might alter our behaviour in some way. Rather the term means we take on something of the others persons mood - at a very simple level, if they are in a bad mood, we experience a bad mood as well. I think the term emotional contagion is a bit limiting in that it only take in emotions. Often it can apply to thoughts, moods and emotions and this is what I would like to draw attention to.

In psychotherapy the term frequently employed is transference. Transference is one of those things that consistently crops up in any type of therapuetic with individuals and couples. Frequently people think it is only a phenomenon which applies within a counselling session. That is not an accurate view. Emotional contagion and cognitive contagion studies point to a view that also encompasses our daily interactions.

A way to think of these sorts of phenomena is to imagine that everyone has an energetic field around them. Think of this field as something which is invisible yet at times can be experienced. For example, it is not unheard of that after a particularly heavy psychotherapy session something of the session lingers on in the room. Another person unaware of what has transpired previously walks into the room and senses the room has a heaviness or sadness to it.

I have had people describe that when they are close to a person their mind goes into a state of fuzziness. I have had others describe that when they are in a presence of a particular person they become angry for no apparent reason. Others describe having negative thoughts around certain people.

It's such a palpable effect that when people start paying attention, it becomes more noticeable when in the proximity of the other person. For instance, when they are within a certain distance of a person they experience anger or fuzziness or some other emotion or set of thoughts. Step out of that certain distance and the anger/fuzziness dissipates rather quickly. This is part of the reason I call it a field, as it often does not involve psychical touching or communication through our normal senses. Instead, it's much closer in nature

to the person's field extending beyond the physical.

Some of the time we can explain the phenomena as the ability to pick up on minimal physical cues. This is an art in itself. But other times as in the walking in the empty room example, something else seems to be going on. Emotional contagion usually refers to the former, whereas transference seems to encompass both.

We can test this phenomena for ourselves by paying attention to how other people make us feel. For example, if you are consistently forgetful around a person, try to gauge the distance when the forgetfulness starts and end. Time it, see how long it lasts for. Really get to know the intricacies of what is occurring. The same is true of other moods; if we are consistently angry around someone without good cause, test to see if the same phenomenon I have described above is occurring or not.

One thing I would caution people about is to not get into a blaming mentality, i.e. you are causing me to get angry. Remember the person at the other end typically is oblivious to how they are affecting others. It is not a thing they would be very aware of and indeed if pointed out will likely only result in a denial from them.

What people can do however is just be more conscious of the effect of others on the state of being. Usually, if we have a certain level of consciousness we can adjust our own internal states to handle whatever state of being is being transferred on to us. For example, if we know we are going to be angry in the presence of someone, we can learn to relax instead as a counter measure. Sometimes it's not practical to just avoid people who make us feel negative in some way, e.g. family members or close friends.

Another thing that people can be conscious of, is that perhaps the person is just going through a phase. A person may be in quite a depressive state and that can affect us negatively, but the depression can lift and the negativity may disperse. Close friends may be going through a particularly hard time but this hard time is not necessarily permanent. Compassion and understanding are also excellent counter measure to being negatively affected.

Footnotes

Experimental evidence of massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks.
<http://www.pnas.org/content/111/24/8788>

New Perspectives on Emotional Contagion: A Review of Classic and Recent Research on

Facial Mimicry and Contagion. <https://interpersona.psychopen.eu/article/view/162/html>

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