

## Is Happiness Contagious?

Find out how you can catch a dose of bliss from those around you.

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published December 1, 2009

by Dawn Weinberger, Contributor

Are you in a bad mood this week—or every week? Do people describe you as “that perpetual scowler”? Do life’s difficult circumstances prevent you from ever having fun?

If so, it could be time to befriend that cheery coworker down the hall, or that popular acquaintance whose upbeat Facebook posts always seem to generate a ton of positive feedback. Why? Well, you might just catch something from them. It’s called happiness, and some experts and researchers say it’s contagious.

James Fowler, a political science professor at the University of San Diego, investigated this very topic, publishing his findings in the December 2008 issue of the *British Medical Journal*. According to Fowler, our own happiness depends on the happiness of our friends, family and other people we interact with.

Robert Biswas-Diener, Ph.D., a happiness expert based in Portland, Ore., agrees.

“Humans can read one another and transmit emotion to one another,” says Biswas-Diener, adding that this extends beyond happiness to other emotions, like sadness and fear. “...when I am happy,” he says, “it signals you to be happy.”

### Happiology 101

So, how exactly does this all work? Biswas-Diener says that the whole spread-of-happiness thing is a complex process involving the biology of human communication. All we really need to know, though, is that one person’s happiness provides a signal to others that it is OK to smile, to laugh, and to look on the bright side.

“When you see me coming and I smile at you, it actually has a disarming effect,” he explains. “I am showing you that I am not a threat, that we can be friends. You react accordingly. Your immediate response is to lower your guard.”

Makes sense, right? Think about it—we’ve all had those blue days that seem instantaneously to turn around after meeting a positive, upbeat colleague for lunch or spending the evening with a group of witty, laid-back friends. It happens, Biswas-Diener says, because happiness is what we crave on a biological level.

“Happiness itself becomes self-reinforcing because it feels good,” he says.

### Anecdotal Evidence

My own research confirms Biswas-Diener’s affirmations. I asked several friends and colleagues whether they think happiness is contagious and most said yes. And not surprisingly, most consider the spread of happiness to be a positive thing.

“I always feel better, more appreciate of my life, when I’m around happy people,” says Mary Mihaly, a writer in Cleveland, Ohio. “Angry, resentful people always start to bring me down—or else I feel annoyed that they choose not to see the beauty in their lives—so I avoid them.”

### Like Attracts Like ... or Not

Despite the fact that I wholeheartedly agree that happiness is contagious, I wouldn’t be performing my due diligence if I didn’t ask Biswas-Diener whether there is any chance that we could be wrong about this. What if happiness isn’t contagious? What if happy people just tend to gravitate toward other happy people, and grumpy people seek out other grumps?

It doesn’t really add up, he explains, because research shows that the majority of people



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are at least mildly happy most of the time (and "most people" includes everyone from those of extremely modest means to wealthy folks on the Forbes 500 list).

"Do happy people hang out with happy people? Of course," he says. "It's not like there is a dividing line and fifty percent of the people are happy and fifty percent of the people are not."

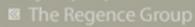
**Come on, Get Happy**

The downside to all of this is that negative emotions are also contagious. So, happy people, beware. If two moody dudes show up at your party and start complaining, it might only be a matter of minutes before the whole group is down in the dumps. The only antidote, of course, is a strong dose of happiness. Smile. Tell a joke. Offer the grumpy guys drinks and handshakes. With any luck, they'll come down with a case of happiness before the evening wraps up.

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