



Eric Bartosz

April 2021

I'm going to throw three words out, and let's see what they make you think of: vaccinate, quarantine and immunity. I'll venture a guess and say Covid came to mind as the first association your brain made. No surprise there, Covid has laid claim to certain words and created plenty of new terms that will probably stick around for a while after we're all through this. To be clear, I'm not talking about Covid in this context, although there is a bit of a tie-in to the pandemic. (It seems like virtually every topic has some connection to Covid at this point, yeah?).

I'm referring to something also highly contagious that we should seek to vaccinate ourselves against—second-hand stress. The good news is that we can build immunity, but step #1 is being aware of the causes and symptoms.

Doubtless, we are all familiar with the concept of stress and the multitude of causes for it in our own life. I would speculate that you also know that prolonged, chronic stress can cause all sorts of health problems. That's a broad topic unto itself, and one we will look at in-depth in another column, but for today let's zero in on this concept that the people around us and their general mood have a significant impact on us. I bring this up now as a timely topic for a couple of reasons.

Reason one is that 'RTW' (return to work) is becoming a reality for the many people that had switched to working from home in the past year, which means that a shared workspace will be part of the daily routine once again. Another reason the topic of second-hand stress is so current is that Covid related anxiety levels remain in a Code Red status for so many people. So unless you are in relative isolation, it's likely you are involved with either passing along or catching this emotional contagion. (Possibly some combination of both!)

As a brief overview of how this whole thing works, let's start with the term mirror neurons. We all have them as factory equipment, and there is no off switch. For a quick and easy example, look no further than having the impulse to yawn when we see someone else do it. It doesn't even matter if it's real-life or on a screen; either one can trigger a mirrored response in us. Basically, these mirror neurons serve as a wireless network that subconsciously syncs up with the emotions of those around us.

Think of these mirror neurons like an emotional Bluetooth that automatically pairs when a compatible device comes into range. Instead of your iPhone pairing with your car when you turn it on, it's your brain pairing with people that come into our orbit. This hardwired trait is believed to have initially been for survival purposes in picking up on the slightest cues from potential enemies and reading the verbal and non-verbal clues correctly. Fast forward to 2021, and we are still very much tuning into what the people around us are broadcasting, whether that energy is positive or negative, such as stress or anxiety.

One massive difference between our ancestors and our present-day selves is the amount of input these mirror neurons needed to process. Obviously, we missed the saber tooth tiger days but it seems like a slam dunk assessment that we have more interaction with others now than ever in history, especially with all of the Zoom and facetime calls. Mirror neurons pick up on all the non-verbal cues along with the spoken communications so all of this additional screen time we have brings a lot of facial expressions and body language input for our mirror neurons to sort through. When we see a co-worker or friend on a Zoom call exasperated about something, even when they're on mute, we share in their stress on a subconscious level that can quickly leave us feeling a little edgy as well.

One first step to avoid soaking up all the ambient stress around us is an awareness that it's happening. Just like you may not want to spend time in a sealed-up room with someone chain-smoking cigarettes, you probably want to avoid a situation of prolonged exposure with someone that has a toxic personality and is spewing not smoke but negative emotions. There was an interesting article in the Harvard Business Review on this topic and four practical strategies to

vaccinate yourself against the emotional contagions you may catch from those around you, whether it be in-person or remotely:

1. **Change your response:** Instead of seeing stress as a negative, create the mindset that you can positively channel stress to sharpen your skills and zero in your focus. Peter Salovey, Founder of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, recommends making it a personal challenge to help those around you deal with their stress more constructively. If you have spent any time trying to diffuse a hostile co-worker, you may already know that using compassion and empathy can quickly check off that challenge box! Still, instead of getting swept up in the negative current, you will be building some self-management skills while also helping the other person/people shift their perspective.
2. **Create positive antibodies:** This deals with neutralizing a situation by countering the negative with a positive. For example, if it's clear by a facial expression that someone you are engaging with is not in a good headspace, something as simple as greeting them with a smile can diffuse the situation and bring things back to an even keel. Also recommended is kicking off the conversation on a more upbeat note instead of starting with a 'what a crazy day!' or some other exasperated lead-off that would elevate the room's stress temperature (or Zoom room).
3. **Build natural immunity:** This is my favorite suggestion on the list. It deals with cultivating the mindset that whatever may be going on around you does not need to affect you personally. Having a mentality of resilience and being 'comfortable in chaos' limits any vulnerabilities to external factors. Like so many other aspects of life, ultimately, we cannot hope to control everything that's going on around us, but we can always seek to manage our reactions to whatever is happening.
4. **Inoculate yourself:** This final strategy is similar to giving yourself a mental booster shot in the morning, anticipating that inevitably you will be encountering a spectrum of different moods and stress from other people throughout the day. This small habit of getting your head right in the morning gives you an advantage in starting from a positive outlook. Specific examples listed in the Harvard article include using a journal for a couple of minutes to write down a positive experience, noting a few things you're grateful for, and of course, getting in some exercise if possible.

As a closing wrap-up, stress and emotions will always be part of our everyday life, and that goes for our own and the people around us. The past year has dialed that up to new levels for many people. That being a known situation, we can proactively take steps to vaccinate against emotional contagions and build up immunity. It's also worth the reminder that mirror neurons also work exceptionally well at processing positivity and a sense of ease. Each one of us plays a role in setting the 'energy thermostat' in a conversation or meeting and we can elevate it or bring it down. Of course, if you know that you are in a mood that will do no good for anybody around you, quarantine for few minutes until you get a handle on it and stop the spread!

PS-If you'd like a printable version of the 'Mood Matters!' sign for your office (or refrigerator at home!) email info@bar40.org for a free PDF



