

Stress Is Contagious — But Some People Are Particularly Vulnerable (M)

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Stress is contagious, flowing through groups of people, from one to the next, but its effects are not the same on everyone, a study finds.

While we can certainly ‘catch’ stress off those around us, there are some strange kinks in how it is transmitted.

For one, researchers have found, people who are more stressed tend to reach out to other people who are also experiencing high levels of stress for support — rather than, as you might imagine, choosing those who are less stressed.

The effect of this is to create groups of people who all suffer higher levels of stress (along with other groups of less stressed people).

Ms Shihann Li, the study’s first author, explained:

“The effect of social influence on individuals’ stress levels is not simply a function of the average of stress levels of those to whom they are connected.

Rather, stress contagion depends on the local consensus of one’s peers in the network.”

How stress is networked

These conclusions come from a study of over 300 students on a professional master’s program in the US.

The results showed that people’s perception of other’s stress made them feel stressed.

In other words, stress is contagious.

It also found that looked at from a network perspective, stress tends to clump together rather than spread out.

Stressed people tend to hang out together and make each other more stressed.

Finally, they found that some personality traits made people particularly sensitive to other's stress — these were being high in neuroticism, low in conscientiousness and with an external locus for control.

Neuroticism is particularly [strongly linked to stress susceptibility](#). Neuroticism is one of the five major aspects of personality — it runs on a continuum from very stable to very neurotic, with most people in the middle of the range.

People higher in neuroticism are at greater risk of depression as they have a stronger response to frustration, threat and loss.

Dr Nynke M. D. Niezink, study co-author, said:

“By investigating personality traits as buffers of the social influence of stress, we show how an individuals' resources can help them resist the spread of stress in social interactions.

This has practical implications for stress-reduction programs.”

11 ways to reduce stress

Scientifically supported ways of reducing stress include:

- [eating a diet higher in fruits and vegetables](#),
- [seeking out 'flow states'](#), as they help reduce the effects of stress,
- [strolling in nature](#), which [reduces activity in the amygdala](#), also [try adding a little mindfulness](#) to the walk,
- [thinking about your romantic partner](#),
- [hug someone](#),
- [sing](#),
- try [mindfulness with hypnosis](#),
- [petting a cat or dog](#),
- [give yourself a foot massage](#),
- [look at trees](#),
- and [listen to birdsong](#),