

Survival of the Nurtured - The Social Context of Happiness

Much of Western thinking has centred around the idea of the single mind and Descartes' dictum, *Cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I am. However, recent research in interpersonal neurobiology suggests a very different picture. Interpersonal neurobiology looks at the **flow of information between individuals** across the social synapse.

'The individual neuron or a single human brain does not exist in nature. Without mutually stimulating interactions, people and neurons wither and die. In neurons this process is called apoptosis; in humans it is called, depression, grief and suicide. From birth until death, each of us needs others who seek us out, show interest in discovering who we are, and help us feel safe.'
Louis Cozolino, 'The Social Brain', *PsychoTherapy in Australia*, Vol. 12 No. 2 February 2006.

How does this relate to happiness?

Cozolino refers to three things:

- seeking out another
- showing interest in discovering who the other is
- helping the other feel safe

Seeking out another

We can all recall times of waiting for the phone that never rings and the emotions associated with this. Or a time when unexpectedly the phone rang, we had a brief conversation, and felt our spirits lift. On these occasions we experience the contrasting effects of not being sought out and of being sought out.

How many times do we refrain from phoning or calling on another to say hello because we are afraid we will be disturbing them and be rebuffed. Maybe we will. But on the other hand, we could be the human stimulation that person is needing and doesn't know where to look for.

You are probably familiar with the tragic example of children in orphanages who were separated from others and from human contact to prevent the spread of contagious diseases. Unfortunately, many more of these children continued to die until they were once again given the human contact and interaction they needed.

Showing interest in discovering who the other person is

Seeking out another person is one step towards strengthening the social bonds that support our humanity. A further step is showing interest in discovering who the other person is.

A conversation is a two-sided affair where people take turns in expressing themselves and listening to the other. When we listen to the other person, we allow ourselves to

find out more about that person.

It's very easy to treat listening as the gap between our own expressions of need, a time to think about what we are going to say next, rather than to allow ourselves to focus on the other, to be curious about them and to make a psychological space for new insights to emerge.

Helping the other person feel safe

I remember when I was a child my father used to become quite irritable and snap at us children. Compared to what some children suffer in their childhood, this is minor.

Nevertheless, I never felt very safe around my father as I feared his sharp tongue and was never sure whether what I was about to say would be received as an acceptable comment or would provoke a sharp retaliatory response. My mother would assure me time and again, 'His bark is worse than his bite!' but I was never convinced. I feared the bark and kept as quiet as possible.

Looking back, I'm sure my father never intended to frighten me. If this had been pointed out to him, I've no doubt he would have altered his behaviour. I know he was very fond of me and would not have wanted to hurt me deliberately.

If Cozolino is correct, and one of our human needs is to feel safe with the people around us, then maybe we need to be more careful of the words we use and the tone we use, especially when we are speaking to those closest to us, such as our children, our parents, our spouses, our co-workers.

Every time we respond to a person with a judgmental comment such as their actions have been silly or stupid or beyond comprehension, we take away from their feeling of being safe with us. If children are continually told they are being silly or stupid or selfish, they may grow up with that being part of their self image, the internal demons that accompany them on their life journey. They are continually forced to fight these demons to the detriment of themselves and those around them.

If we respond to our peers - our parents, spouses, co-workers or colleagues with such comments, we are in effect pushing them away from us. We set up a barrier and start to create the first stage of conflict.

Happiness is a social affair

Well, maybe not entirely. But if Cozolino and other researchers are correct, then how we behave towards and communicate to others has a large bearing on how happy they and we feel. In another part of his article, Cozolino talks of the 'survival of the nurtured': 'We can now add a corollary to Darwin's survival of the fittest. Those who are nurtured best, survive best.'