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## People



Photo by C.J. Burton

### Big Idea...

## We're Wired to Connect

By Mark Matousek, January & February 2007

Our brains are designed to be social, says bestselling science writer Daniel Goleman—and they catch emotions the same way we catch colds

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Have you ever wondered why a stranger's smile can transform your entire day? Why your eyes mist up when you see someone crying, and the sight of a yawn can leave you exhausted? Daniel Goleman, Ph.D., has wondered, too, and just as he helped revolutionize our definition of what it means to be smart with his 1995 blockbuster, [Emotional Intelligence](#), the two-time Pulitzer nominee and former science reporter for *The New York Times* has dropped a bombshell on our understanding of human connection in his startling new book, [Social Intelligence](#) (Bantam).

For the first time in history, thanks to recent breakthroughs in neuroscience, experts are able to observe brain activity while we're in the act of feeling—and their findings have been astonishing. Once believed to be lumps of lonely gray matter cogitating between our ears, our brains turn out to be more like interlooped, Wi-Fi octopi with invisible tentacles slithering in all directions, at every moment, constantly picking up messages we're not aware of and prompting reactions—including illnesses—in ways never before understood.

"The brain itself is social—that's the most exciting finding," Goleman explains during lunch at a restaurant near his home in Massachusetts. "One person's inner state affects and drives the other

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person. We're forming brain-to-brain bridges—a two-way traffic system—all the time. We actually catch each other's emotions like a cold."

The more important the relationship, the more potent such "contagion" will be. A stranger's putdown may roll off your back, while the same zinger from your boss is devastating. "If we're in toxic relationships with people who are constantly putting us down, this has actual physical consequences," Goleman says. Stress produces a harmful chemical called cortisol, which interferes with certain immune cell functions. Positive interactions prompt the body to secrete oxytocin (the same chemical released during lovemaking), boosting the immune system and decreasing stress hormones. As a doting grandparent himself (with author-therapist wife Tara Bennett-Goleman), the author often feels this felicitous rush. "I was just with my two-year-old granddaughter," he says. "This girl is like a vitamin for me. Being with her actually feels like a kind of elixir. The most important people in our lives can be our biological allies."

The notion of relationships as pharmaceutical is a new concept. "My mother is 96," Goleman goes on. "She was a professor of sociology whose husband—my father—died many years ago, leaving her with a big house. After retiring at 65, she decided to let graduate students live there for free. She's since had a long succession of housemates. When she was 90, a couple from Taiwan had a baby while they were living there. The child regarded her as Grandma and lived there till the age of two. During that time, I swore I could see my mother getting younger. It was stunning." But not, he adds, completely surprising. "This was the living arrangement we were designed for, remember? For most of human history there were extended families where the elderly lived in the same household as the babies. Many older people have the time and nurturing energy that kids crave—and vice versa. If I were designing assisted-living facilities, I'd put daycare centers in them and allow residents to volunteer. Institutions are cheating children," he says. "And we older people need it, too."

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### **Positive interactions can boost the immune system.**

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Young or old, people can affect our personalities. Though each of us has a distinctive temperament and a "set point of happiness" modulating our general mood, science has now confirmed that these tendencies are not locked in. Anger-prone people, for example, can "infect" themselves with calmness by spending time with mellow individuals, absorbing less-aggressive behavior and thereby sharpening social intelligence.

A key to understanding this process is something called mirror neurons: "neurons whose only job is to recognize a smile and make you smile in return," says Goleman (the same goes for frowning and other reactions). This is why, when you're smiling, the whole world does indeed seem to smile with you. It also explains the Michelangelo phenomenon, in which long-term partners come to resemble each other through facial-muscle mimicry and "empathic resonance." If you've ever seen a group with a case of the giggles, you've witnessed mirror neurons at play. Such mirroring takes place in the realm of ideas, too, which is why sweeping cultural ideals and prejudices can spread through populations with viral speed.

This phenomenon gets to the heart of why social intelligence matters most: its impact on suffering and creating a less crazy world. It is critical, Goleman believes, that we stop treating people as objects or as functionaries who are there to give us something. This can range from barking at telephone operators to the sort of old-shoe treatment that long-term partners often use in relating to each other (talking at, rather than to, each other). We need, he says, a richer human connection.

Unfortunately, what he calls the "inexorable technocrep" of contemporary culture threatens such meaningful connection. Presciently remarking on the TV set in 1963, poet T.S. Eliot noted that this techno-shredder of the social fabric "permits millions of people to listen to the same joke at the same time, and yet remain lonesome." We can only imagine what the dour writer would have made of Internet dating. And as Goleman points out, this "constant digital connectivity" can deaden us to the people around us. Social intelligence, he says, means putting down your BlackBerry, actually paying full attention—showing people that they're being experienced—which is basically what each of us wants more than anything. Scientists agree that such connection—or lack of it—will determine our survival as a species: "Empathy," writes Goleman, "is the prime inhibitor of human cruelty."

And our social brains are wired for kindness, despite the gore you may see on the nightly news. "It's an

aberration to be cruel," says Goleman. Primitive tribes learned that strength lay in numbers, and that their chances of surviving a brutal environment increased exponentially through helping their neighbors (as opposed to, say, chopping their heads off). Even young children are wired for compassion. One study in Goleman's book found that infants cry when they see or hear another baby crying, but rarely when they hear recordings of their own distress. In another study, monkeys starved themselves after realizing that when they took food, a shock was delivered to their cage mate.

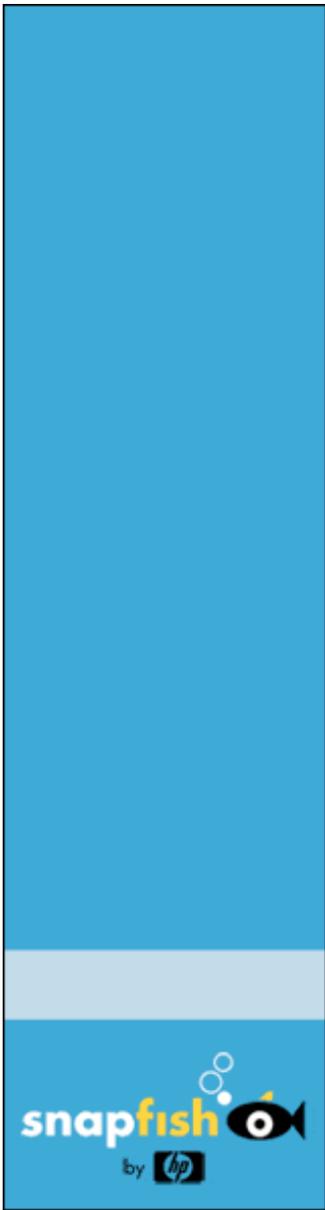
Perhaps the most inspiring piece of the social-intelligence puzzle is neuroplasticity: the discovery that our brains never stop evolving. "Stem cells manufacture 10,000 brain cells every day till you die," says Goleman. "Social interaction helps neurogenesis. The brain rises to the occasion the more you challenge it.

*Mark Matousek's The Art of Survival (Bloomsbury) will be published next year.*

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