

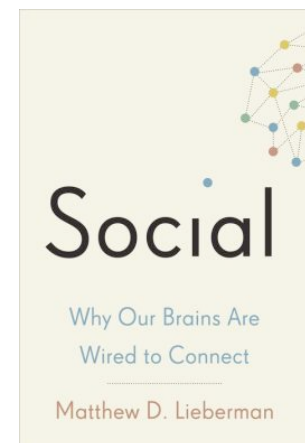


The Science of Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect

by [Maria Popova](#)

“The self is more of a superhighway for social influence than it is the impenetrable private fortress we believe it to be.”

“Without the sense of fellowship with men of like mind,” [Einstein](#) wrote, “life would have seemed to me empty.” It is perhaps unsurprising that the iconic physicist, celebrated as “[the quintessential modern genius](#),” intuited something fundamental about the inner workings of the human mind and soul long before science itself had attempted to concretize it with empirical evidence. Now, it has: In *[Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect](#)* ([public library](#)), neuroscientist [Matthew D. Lieberman](#), director of UCLA’s Social Cognitive Neuroscience lab, sets out to “get clear about ‘who we are’ as social creatures and to reveal how a more accurate understanding of our social nature can improve our lives and our society.



Lieberman, who has spent the past two decades using tools like fMRI to study how the human brain responds to its social context, has found over and over again that our brains aren’t merely simplistic mechanisms that only respond to pain and pleasure, as philosopher Jeremy Bentham famously claimed, but are instead wired to connect. At the heart of his inquiry is a simple question: Why do we feel such intense agony when we lose a loved one? He argues that, far from being a design flaw in our neural architecture, our capacity for such overwhelming grief is a vital feature of our evolutionary constitution:

The research my wife and I have done over the past decade shows that this response, far from being an accident, is actually profoundly important to our survival. Our brains evolved to experience threats to our social connections in much the same way they experience physical pain. By activating the same neural circuitry that causes us to feel physical pain, our experience of social pain helps ensure the survival of our children by helping to keep them close to their parents. The neural link between social and physical pain also ensures that staying socially connected will be a lifelong need, like food and warmth. Given the fact that our brains treat social and physical pain similarly, should we as a society treat social pain differently than we do? We don’t expect someone with a broken leg to “just get over it.” And yet when it comes to the pain of social loss, this is a common response. The research that I and others have done using fMRI shows that how we experience social pain is at odds with our perception of

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