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Why We Are Wired to Connect

Scientist Matthew Lieberman uncovers the neuroscience of human connections—and the broad implications for how we live our lives

By Gareth Cook

When we experience social [pain](#) — a snub, a cruel word — the feeling is as real as physical pain. That finding is among those in a new book, [Social](#), and it is part of scientist Matthew Lieberman’s case that our need to connect is as fundamental as our need for food and [water](#). He answered questions from Mind Matters editor [Gareth Cook](#).

You argue that our need to connect socially is “powerful.” But just how powerful is it?

Different cultures have different beliefs about how important social connection and interdependence are to our lives. In the West, we like to think of ourselves as relatively immune to sway of those around us while we each pursue our personal destiny. But I think this is a story we like to tell ourselves rather than what really happens.

Across many studies of mammals, from the smallest rodents all the way to us humans, the data suggests that we are profoundly shaped by our social environment and that we suffer greatly when our social bonds are threatened or severed. When this happens in childhood it can lead to long-term health and educational problems. We may not like the fact that we are wired such that our well-being depends on our connections with others, but the facts are the facts.



Matthew Lieberman
Image: Lee Brubaker

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What is the connection between physical pain and social pain? Why is this insight important?

Languages around the world use pain language to express social pain (“she broke my heart”, “he hurt my feelings”), but this could have all just have been a metaphor. As it turns out it is more than a metaphor – social pain is real pain.

With respect to understanding human nature, I think this finding is pretty significant. The things that cause us to feel pain are things that are evolutionary recognized as threats to our survival and the existence of social pain is a sign that evolution has treated social connection like a necessity, not a luxury. It also alters our motivational landscape. We tend to assume that people’s behavior is narrowly self-interested, focused on getting more material benefits for themselves and avoiding physical threats and the exertion of effort. But because of how social pain and pleasure are wired into our operating system, these are motivational ends in and of themselves. We don’t focus on being connected solely in order to extract money and other resources from people – being connected needs no ulterior motive.

This has major consequences for how we think about structuring our organizations and institutions. At businesses worldwide, pay for performance is just about the only incentive used to motivate employees. However, praise and an environment free from social threats are also powerful motivators. Because social pain and pleasure haven’t been a part of our theory of “who we are” we tend not to use these social motivators as much as we could.

You devote a section of your book to what you call “mindreading.” What do you mean by this, and why do you see it as so essential?

First off, I’m not referring to the ESP kind of mindreading. I mean the everyday variety that each of us use in most social interactions. We have a profound proclivity towards trying to understand the thoughts and feelings bouncing around inside the skulls of people we interact with, characters on television, and even animated shapes moving around a computer screen. Although we are far from perfect at gleaning the actual mental states of others, the fact that we can do this at all gives us an unparalleled ability to cooperate and collaborate with others – using their goals to help drive our own behavior.

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1. babby
12:38 AM 10/24/13

Well, people who went to one-room schoolhouses in the dim, distant past probably could corroborate those findings. My mom, who was born in 1910, had just such an early education & she could recall the way the older students helped out the

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