

Feeling cold is contagious, scientists find

13 January 2015, by James Hakner



Just looking at somebody shivering is enough to make us feel cold, according to new research at the University of Sussex in the UK.

Volunteers who watched videos of people putting their hands in [cold water](#) found their own body [temperature](#) drop significantly.

The research by scientists in the Brighton and Sussex Medical School shows that humans are susceptible to 'temperature contagion'.

Neuropsychiatrist Dr Neil Harrison, who led the research, suggests that such unconscious physiological changes may help us empathise with one another and live in communities.

He said: "Mimicking another person is believed to help us create an internal model of their [physiological state](#) which we can use to better understand their motivations and how they are feeling."

"Humans are profoundly social creatures and much of humans' success results from our ability to

work together in complex communities - this would be hard to do if we were not able to rapidly empathise with each other and predict one another's thoughts, feelings and motivations."

For the research, which was published in the journal *PLOS ONE*, 36 participants each watched eight videos of actors putting their hands in either visibly warm or cold water. At the same time, the temperature of their own hands was measured. Their hands were significantly colder when watching the 'cold' videos. However, the 'warm' videos did not cause a change.

Dr Harrison explains: "We think that this is probably because the warm videos were less potent - the only cues that the water was warm was steam at the beginning of the videos and the pink colour of the actor's hand (whereas blocks of ice were clearly visible throughout the duration of the cold video).

"There is also some evidence to suggest that people may be more sensitive to others appearing cold than hot."

More information: The journal article 'You Turn Me Cold: Evidence for Temperature Contagion' can be accessed on the *PLOS ONE* website: www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0116126

Provided by University of Sussex

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