

Protect Your Mood

by Bo Forbes, Psy.D.

Don't let someone else's bad attitude ruin your outlook. Stay positive with these strategies



Have you ever felt on top of the world, only to be suddenly deflated by a coworker's bad mood? It's no surprise, given that emotions are even more contagious than colds or flu. Just looking at happy or sad faces, according to a study published in *Psychiatry Research*, can evoke those same feelings in us. That's good news if you're surrounded by boundless optimists, but unfortunate, even unhealthy, if those around you act sour.

Brain researchers call this "emotional contagion": that unsettled feeling you get around a neighbor's nervous

energy, or the sorrow you feel over a loved one's distress. We're biologically programmed for empathy, thanks to mirror neurons in the brain that help us sense (and "catch") others' emotions. As for the health implications? Potentially staggering. University College London researchers have linked positive mental states with reduced neuroendocrine and inflammatory activity. Says *Social Intelligence* author Daniel Goleman, Ph.D., "Positive emotions enhance your immunity, while chronic negative ones can make you sick and even shorten your lifespan."



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Since we're talking seconds, not weeks, of incubation time, any interaction you have with someone (the nice woman behind the deli counter, the complaining friend) can be emotionally and biologically significant. You can't stop the primal instinct to mirror others—nor would you want to when you're on the receiving end of a good vibe. But you can get familiar with the main personality types that put you at risk for infection.

In my work as a clinical psychologist for 17 years (and a yoga teacher for eight), I've seen five types of toxic emotions come up again and again in different scenarios. Deep down, many of these people yearn for others to metabolize their intolerable emotions and reflect them back in a healthier form. Here's what to watch out for—and what to do about it.

Dark-Side Dwellers

Allie, a client in her thirties, lived on the Dark Side. In her eyes, her family's occasional missteps were huge transgressions and her boss was going to demote her any minute. She surrounded herself with friends who held equally downbeat worldviews. Their gatherings were competitive, with highest status conferred on the one with the worst circumstances.

Dark-Side Dwellers see the glass-half-empty side of things—and prompt others to do the same. They bond around tales of woe, and in their presence, it's hard not to join in.

ANTIDOTE When you catch a negative emotion, it's what you do with it that counts. If you're poisoned by someone's misery, don't feel you need to mirror her negativity to show loyalty. Instead, consistently respond with positive energy, such as an encouraging word or a supportive suggestion.

Anger Addicts

My friend Sara dated an angry man who would routinely blow up over minor things. Normally gentle and

compassionate, Sarah would uncharacteristically scream back at him—and then go on to yell at the bank teller, the mailman, and the teachers at her child's school.

Those who chronically marinate in anger will increase your fear, infect you with aggression, or both. When you respond to their ire in kind, you only fan the flames. If you feel angry long after a run-in with an Anger Addict, you may have caught the bug.

ANTIDOTE Limit the potential for contagion by attending matter-of-factly to the topic of conversation you're having ("The dog ran away") rather than the underlying anger ("Who's to blame for leaving the door open?"). If things get too heated, take a step back. Time away from the Anger Addict will lend perspective about what to do next—and give you a chance to rebuild positive energy (see "Good Vibes Club," opposite page, for ideas).

Emotional Parasites

Nina, a client, was an expert at getting attention. She'd keep her friends on the phone all night discussing her latest fight with her boyfriend, and hold weekend summits to hash over yet another career path. Even after setting up a rotation to address her needs, Nina's "go-to" team was exhausted.

When you're constantly called to the rescue, or feel spent after even a brief time with someone, beware. Emotional Parasites siphon your energy until there's almost nothing left. You will wind up playing parent or therapist until they, temporarily recharged, move on to other dramas.

ANTIDOTE The more grounded you are, the more clarity you'll have about the situation—including whether you need to opt out of the support role altogether. Boost your own emotional foundation with a mind/body practice such as yoga and meditation, both shown in recent studies to calm emotional arousal and the stress response. Researchers from Harvard Medical

Good Vibes Club

Emotional contagion cuts both ways. Spread the love (and boost your emotional immunity) with these daily practices.

- + Think of something you're grateful for. Make this your first exercise of the day—and enjoy the resulting positive energy.
- + Surround yourself with optimistic, upbeat people who see the best in you, in others, and in the world.
- + Make a regular habit of mind/body practices such as yoga, tai chi, and meditation to reduce your emotional reactivity.
- + Start a healthy chain of emotions. Try to have a spontaneously upbeat interaction with each person who crosses your path.
- + Remind yourself that negative emotions, however intense, are impermanent: They're part of the changing scenery of our lives.
- + As much as you can, make eye contact with others—and smile.

School have found that meditation also increases activity in parts of the brain involved in emotional contagion.

Fear Mongers

Laurie, a student of mine, is prone to anxiety. During class she gets wound up and worries incessantly: Is she getting the pose right? Could the topic we're discussing be related to her insomnia? Laurie often sets other students off, and the number of questions generally doubles when she's present.

When someone in your vicinity acts as if the sky were falling, it's hard not to mirror their anxiety. Anxious people often prompt anxiety in others—a particularly stealthy brand of emotional contagion, since the target can be elusive. You might not even be sure what you're anxious about.

ANTIDOTE Create boundaries to protect your immunity, striking a balance between empathy and distance. Setting buffer zones between your feelings and others' will help. Whenever you're around a Fear Monger, remind yourself that you have the freedom to experience your own emotions. Reinforce this knowledge with a mental note, such as "My daughter (friend, partner, coworker) is upset right now, but I choose to stay centered."

Gossips

Jack, a grad student I know, can't help but prick up his ears when he hears the dirt being dished on a professor he dislikes (and who happens to have passed him up for an assistant position). He takes the news and runs with it, even going so far as to tell other professors in the department, which has caused infighting among the faculty and a trail of severed relationships.

Gossip is an insidious form of emotional contagion, since the "buzz" you get from it can feel, at first, like positive energy. At the heart of most gossip lies envy; with envy, the natural tendency is to spoil what someone else has, and the "verbal spoiling" of gossip is an effective means.

ANTIDOTE If you've been drawn into a gossip's web, try to turn the conversation around; point out something positive about the person being dished about. If this doesn't work, plainly let gossipers know you're uncomfortable. They'll get the message and, in the long run, are likely to respect you more. Consider, too, setting an intention to practice the Buddhist principle of "right speech": Abstain from lying, divisive and abusive speech, and idle chatter. Over time, this will surely boost your immunity to gossip. +



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