



INTEGRATE TO LIVE

Restore Resilience. Cultivate Community. Impact your World

Week 21 Transcript: Wired For Connection

This week, we continue to deepen our understanding of who we are in relationships by exploring how our brains are wired for connection. We are social creatures and our need for social connection is as important to us as our need for food and warmth.

Not only are we social beings, but the brain is a social organ. Neuroscience confirms that we are hard-wired to connect. It also proves a single functioning neuron or a single functioning brain does not exist in nature. We need input from others to keep us alive.

Mirror neurons, located throughout the brain, help us read other peoples' feelings and actions. They are the neurology of empathy. It's how we share the internal experience of another.

While reading the emotions of the person we're in conversation with, the same regions of the brain light up in us, the listener. These mirror neurons also help us understand the intention behind the action.

For instance, when we see someone lift their hand, mirror neurons help us perceive if they are reaching to swipe their hair out of their face or winding up to give us a high five.

Our mirror neurons fire as we watch them lift their hand. We take in observable information, mirroring what we see and experience and sending that signal to our bodies.

When we feel in our bodies what they are feeling in their body, our higher brain then receives the information to be interpreted.

Most communication is nonverbal – expressed through tone of voice, body language and facial expressions. This explains why mirror neurons are essential in developing our capacity to pay attention and consciously tune in to our own experiences, as well as the experience of others. This is called attunement.

Let's do something fun for a moment. Watch me as I bite this strawberry.



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Take a moment to notice what you are experiencing internally as your mirror neurons process my experience. While you watch me do this, it may simulate an internal state in you that matches what I'm experiencing.

You may have experienced hunger, your mouth watering, or a tightness in the jaw we feel when eating something a little sweet or sour. Pretty cool, huh?

Next, your brain will try to resonate with my emotional experience – am I enjoying the strawberry? am I grumpy and need a snack? You'll resonate with my experience and feel with me what I am feeling. It's the foundation for empathy.

I've been very intentional with you guys, taking the time necessary to help you develop the capacity to attune. First with yourself so you can then practice with others.

Strengthened attunement helps us know ourselves' better as well as read the meaning and purpose of other people's emotional signals. Resonance is what connects us.

So, since we are so intrinsically wired for connection, what happens when we aren't connected? Good question.

One of the seminal studies in Relational-Cultural Neurobiology revealed what is referred to as SPOT: Social Pain / Physical Pain Overlap Theory.

Eisenberger and Lieberman, researchers at UCLA, performed social exclusion experiments while participants who were connected to fMRI machines were slowly left out of a multi-player computer game.

What surprised them is the same area that lit up in the brain when research subjects experienced social rejection is the same area of the brain that becomes activated when we anticipate or experience physical pain or injury.



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Social scientists say it seems that creating connection is so vital to our survival that our social engagement system piggy-backed onto the system that signifies and prevents physical pain or injury. It utilizes a similar pain signal to protect us from social separation and disconnection.

Social pain registers in the brain, and in our experience, the same as physical pain. Saying that, “my feelings are hurt” or “my heart is broken” are not just metaphor.

We want connection more than most things in life, but it takes courage to connect. It’s good to know we were designed, specifically, to attune and engage with those around us.

Let’s practice being more attuned in our relationships this week and be sure to download the action guide to support this process and share what you are learning on our group page.