

**HANDS UP IF PEOPLE OFTEN DESCRIBE YOU** as 'compassionate' and 'a good listener'?

They're great qualities to have in your friend tank, but there's a good chance your caring nature is adding unnecessary weight to your stress load.

Turns out, stress – that nasty feeling we try so hard to combat with yoga and dreamy tropical holidays – is contagious. In fact, scientists from the Max Planck Institute for Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Germany have confirmed it spreads like the norovirus – and we're catching it from the people we love, strangers and even TV shows.

The study charted the cortisol levels of people divided into pairs: some romantic partners and others strangers. As one person underwent a challenging maths test or a faux job interview, the other watched through a one-way mirror or on a TV monitor. In the observers, 26 per cent showed physical signs of stress. The biggest change was seen in those whose partners were under pressure – 40 per cent of this group experienced a cortisol surge. But even watching a stranger struggle with stress gave 10 per cent of observers a significant cortisol jolt. Watching through the mirror led to 30 per cent of observers feeling stressed, dropping slightly to 24 per cent for those watching on a TV screen.

The study echoes the findings of similar US research in 2011 that saw observers' cortisol rise in proportion to that of the person they were watching stress out. The verdict? Humans are hardwired for empathy, and just watching people suffer on TV could be enough to get your stomach churning.

**\*THE DAILY DOSE**

Before you start ditching your *Game of Thrones* DVDs, don't panic – short bursts of stress (say, while you give a presentation) are normal and nothing to worry about. The problem, says psychologist Dr Lissa Johnson ([lissajohnson.com.au](http://lissajohnson.com.au)), is the chronic kind. "Second-hand stress is a problem if it's a perpetual issue day in, day out," she explains. "If you feel your own physiology reliably change when someone walks into a room – for instance, your stomach churns, your chest seizes up or your teeth clench – you might have become sensitised to their stress."

There are loads of ways we could be catching stress from people around us. Dr Johnson says, from 'mirror neurons' in the brain that fire when we watch someone's facial expression change, to feeling responsible for others' wellbeing. It can make your muscles tense, your mind race and your irritability soar. And if you're

catching this feeling on a regular basis, it can damage your heart, sleep, weight, immunity, happiness and more.

Imagine you've had an exhausting day with frantic colleagues, dealt with some family issue or listened to a friend vent over lunch, then come home to 'relax' in front of an episode of *Sons of Anarchy*. If that's a familiar scenario, you could be absorbing far more than your fair share of stress.

"There can be so many triggers, such as negativity in the news, in conversation and on everyday TV," says WFLife coach Debbie Spellman. "Unless we take responsibility for what we allow to enter into our minds, our stress triggers will continue to fire."

**\*CARE FACTOR**

Of course, avoiding second-hand stress isn't as simple as deleting oversharers on Facebook. We all want to be a good friend or partner when our loved ones need us and often that means lending a shoulder to cry on. So how do you offer support without absorbing your mate's worries?

**"There can be so many triggers, such as negativity in the news and on everyday TV"**

"Remind yourself that although you care deeply about the other person, you are not the one living their life," says Dr Johnson. "Don't take responsibility for fixing the cause of another person's stress. Instead, focus on being with the other person in a kind and supportive way."

Being the anchor to their ship (rather than hopping on for the ride) is essential, says Spellman. "To be most effective is to show up with kindness, encouragement and compassion," she explains. "Being the stable one will enable the other person to calm down and therefore create the space to help guide them through their stressful circumstances."

And while we tend to label all negative situations as well, negative, there's actually a lovely payoff to being someone's lifeline in a crisis, says Dr Johnson. "You can allow yourself to be nourished by your own warmth towards the other person rather than drained by their problems," she suggests. "Embrace the enhanced closeness that comes from sharing difficultly and allow yourself to feel good about the other person's trust in you."

**Build your stress defence**  
These tricks will ward off stress before it takes hold

**TAKE A BREAK**

Factor relaxing activities into your everyday, says Dr Johnson. "Know what calms you and make a habit of it."

**STAY POSITIVE**

"What you put in your mind affects how you view reality," says Spellman. So, if the news sets your pulse racing, "focus your attention on media that brings you positivity."

**REACH OUT**

"Allow yourself to accept someone else's empathy and care," says Dr Johnson.

**FIND THE REAL PROBLEM**

If a thriller TV series sets your mind off at night, ask yourself why. "Usually the remedy isn't avoiding the TV show but addressing the underlying issue that makes you prone to a prolonged distress response," says Dr Johnson.

**SET BOUNDARIES**

If a certain person always puts you on red alert, "make it clear you won't engage in negative conversation," says Spellman. "Only respond when they're ready to talk about a solution."

**COME HOME**

"You can take a tour of someone else's perspective, but always come back to yourself," Dr Johnson tips.

# Are you a

# STRESS SPONGE?

If you're constantly soaking up others' problems, it's time to give yourself a squeeze

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