

Oxytocin could help you reach out to others for support, researchers show

25 June 2013

The next time someone snubs you at a party and you think hiding is the solution to escape your feelings of rejection, think again. Scientists have shown that reaching out to other people during a stressful event is an effective way to improve your mood, and researchers at Concordia University suggest that the hormone oxytocin may help you accomplish just that.

Mark Ellenbogen and Christopher Cardoso, researchers in Concordia's Centre for Research in Human Development are taking a closer look at [oxytocin](#), a hormone traditionally studied for its role in [childbirth](#) and breastfeeding, and more recently for its effect on [social behaviour](#). Their latest study, published in the peer-reviewed journal *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, shows that oxytocin can increase a person's trust in others following [social rejection](#).

Explains Ellenbogen, "that means that instead of the traditional 'fight or flight' response to social conflict where people get revved up to respond to a challenge or run away from it, oxytocin may promote the 'tend and befriend' response where people reach out to others for support after a stressful event. That can, in turn, strengthen [social bonds](#) and may be a healthier way to cope."

In a double-blind experiment, 100 students were administered either oxytocin or a [placebo](#) via a [nasal spray](#), then subjected to social rejection. In a conversation that was staged to simulate real life, researchers posing as students disagreed with, interrupted and ignored the unsuspecting participants. Using mood and personality questionnaires, the data showed that participants who were particularly distressed after being snubbed by the researchers reported greater trust in other people if they sniffed oxytocin prior to the event, but not if they sniffed the placebo. In contrast, oxytocin had no effect on trust in those who were not emotionally affected by social rejection.

Cardoso, who is a doctoral student in the Department of Psychology, says that studying oxytocin may provide future options for those who suffer from mental health conditions characterized by high levels of stress and low levels of [social support](#), like depression. "If someone is feeling very distressed, oxytocin could promote social support seeking, and that may be especially helpful to those individuals," he says, noting that people with depression tend to naturally withdraw even though reaching out to social support systems can alleviate depression and facilitate recovery.

For Ellenbogen, who holds a Canada Research Chair in Developmental Psychopathology, the contribution of stress to the development of mood disorders like depression and bipolar disorder has long been a research focus. "I'm concerned with the biological underpinnings of stress, particularly interpersonal stress, which is thought to be a strong predictor of these mental disorders. So, oxytocin is a natural fit with my interests," says Ellenbogen. "The next phase of research will begin to study oxytocin's effects in those who are at high risk for developing clinical depression."

Cardoso says reactions to oxytocin seem to be more variable depending on individual differences and contextual factors than most pharmaceuticals, so learning more about how the hormone operates can help scientists to figure out how it might be used in future treatments.

"Previous studies have shown that natural oxytocin is higher in distressed people, but before this study nobody could say with certainty why that was the case," Cardoso says, "In distressed people, oxytocin may improve one's motivation to reach out to others for support. That idea is cause for a certain degree of excitement, both in the research community and for those who suffer from mood disorders."

Provided by Concordia University

APA citation: Oxytocin could help you reach out to others for support, researchers show (2013, June 25)
retrieved 26 February 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-06-oxytocin.html>

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