



e-quilibrium

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Contagion

Media reports of bacterial infections have been proliferating, particularly those involving methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA). Several schools have closed for intensive efforts to disinfect their buildings, although public health recommendations (e.g., Centers for Disease Control) indicate that frequent hand-washing, regularly cleaning surfaces, and proper covering of wounds are much more effective at prevention than is a concentrated disinfection effort.

While MRSA infections obviously must be taken seriously and managed appropriately, it is interesting to me that schools would close for an intensive response that public health experts tell us is not as effective as is increased attention to routine preventive efforts. A number of factors contribute to such a response, but the one I wish to address here is "emotional contagion."

Emotional contagion essentially refers to the tendency to feel emotions that are similar to and influenced by the emotions of others. Behavioral science research indicates that the process is largely automatic, not the result of thought. Furthermore, contagion of positive emotions appears to be as strong as contagion of negative emotions. The emotional contagion of fear regarding MRSA transmission has contributed to a potentially excessive and ineffective response (i.e., closing schools for thorough cleaning) rather than the more considered and thoughtful response of intensifying routine preventive measures.

Sigal Barsade of the Wharton School (business school) of the University of Pennsylvania has suggested that people are “walking mood inductors” with reference to the influence of emotional contagion. For our own health and well being, there are important implications. Our emotional states are influenced by the emotions of those with whom we associate and our moods impact the moods of those around us. One study of charismatic leaders indicated that they tend to express more positive emotions than do less charismatic leaders, and that leaders’ positive emotional expressions have a direct impact on the moods of those around them. Keep in mind that although emotions can be expressed verbally, the process of emotional contagion also occurs in the absence of words.

Given the mental and physical health benefits of positive mood states, one can employ the emotional contagion phenomenon in a health-enhancing manner. To the extent that I can foster and express positive emotion myself, this will “automatically” affect those around me. In turn, I will be re-infected by the more positive moods around me. Obviously, this upward spiral is more health promoting than the downward spiral that occurs with negative emotional contagion.

Returning to MRSA, I am not suggesting that we should have a positive emotional response to news of a MRSA infection in a school or elsewhere. Rather, to the extent that we can individually minimize excessive fear and anxiety, we can avoid contributing to the excessive emotional contagion that infects communities, often leading to ineffective reactions. More appropriate emotional responses are conducive to the implementation of reasoned efforts that have the greatest potential to benefit the health of the community.

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