

KEEPING YOUR SANITY THROUGH UNDERSTANDING YOUR PERSONAL INFLUENCE

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It's easy to underestimate our effect on

others.

We can go about our business, and assume that everyone else is going about theirs. New parents can be stunned sometimes to hear their own words coming out of their kid's mouths; their own actions being recreated by their children. But our impact on each other runs deep, and extends far beyond our immediate family.

Those we are close to, and even those people who are three degrees of separation away from those we are close to – friends of friends of friends – are our sphere of influence... and we are theirs. What we say and do makes a real impact on those around us, and even on those a moderate distance away.

Appreciating this can be a great motivator for living our best life.

In studies by Christakis and Fowler, drawing from the Framingham Heart Study subjects, they found just how powerful our personal contacts with people can be. Here are some examples:

- Our chances of becoming obese increases by 57% if we have a friend who becomes obese.
- Among pairs of adult siblings, if one sibling becomes obese the chance that the other will become obese increases by 40%
- If one spouse becomes obese the likelihood that the other spouse will become obese increases by 37%
- For every happy friend we have, our likelihood of being happy ourselves increases by 9%.

That's for our immediate connections; in other studies, they found that we can have a remarkable effect on others even several steps removed from our direct contact:

- If our friend's friend's *friend* quit smoking, we are much more likely to quit smoking ourselves.

- Even happy people we've never met, three degrees of separation away, have a positive effect on our own happiness.

Good and bad behaviors pass from friend to friend; we influence each other's health and happiness just by our social interactions.

But the impact of our behavior in one arena is particularly significant... shocking even.

You might be familiar with the experiments that Stanley Milgram chronicled in his book, *Obedience to Authority*. Milgram sought to study the degree to which people would follow the dictates of an authority figure into fairly brutal territory.

In these experiments, subjects entered a room in which there was an authority figure wearing an official white lab coat. The subject was then instructed that his or her job was to administer a shock to a person in the next room whenever that person answered a question incorrectly. The first subject – the one giving the (pretend) shock – had no idea that the person to be shocked was in on the experiment and was just acting.

The subjects thought they were there to assist the experimenter, but in truth, they were the ones who were being studied. In front of them was a panel of switches marked with increasing voltage from 15 to 450 volts. Toward the upper range of voltage the switchboard was marked, "Danger, severe shock," and then, past that, "XXX."

As the shocks were given, whenever the subjects would look to the authority figure, or question what they were supposed to do, the authority simply answered emphatically, "The experiment requires that you continue."

As the subjects administered the shocks, the pretend subjects from the other room expressed pain, pleaded to be released, screamed, and then finally yelled loudly that they had heart pains. Once they reached 330 volts, there was just silence.

What percentage of subjects do you think continued on through the expressions of pain, the screams, and the ominous silence through the full range of shocks?

If you're not familiar with this study, I doubt that you would guess correctly. Milgram himself expected very few. But fully *65% administered the full range of electric shock – past the danger zone, through the XXX, all the way to 450 volts.*

That's pretty awful. But now comes the part where we influence each other, because there's a fascinating, inspiring, and little known facet to this study:

When subjects first witnessed another subject refuse to continue the experiment, 90% of those subjects would then refuse to comply with the authority themselves, when it was their turn.

Think about that again for a moment: *When people see us refuse to comply with an authority trying to get us to do harm, only 10% of those people will go on to comply with that authority – when two-thirds would have done so before.*

That is a huge impact.

In practice, what this means is that people are watching. What we do in our daily lives can have a very positive – or very negative – influence on the people around us. This makes a strong case for asserting our own leadership and personal virtue, to say the least.

But not from nagging or yelling or lecturing, because *we influence others primarily from our actions*.

When we return that extra change from a miscalculated bill, when we don't go along with others in our group who are willing to fudge data, appease a bully, gossip, or intentionally hurt somebody, other people are influenced, and *that* can make a real impact.

When we choose to behave with honor and integrity – particularly when other people aren't – somebody will likely notice, and may very well make a different *and better* decision him or herself as a result.

When we behave with good manners, expressing gratitude, treating everyone we see with respect and goodwill, that makes others feel better, and it also makes it easier for them to pass that attitude along.

We can worry (justifiably) about the effect of media, politicians, and other forces that are often outside of our control; but It is in our day-to-day lives where most of us make our greatest impact, and that impact is substantial.

When we decide to *not* go along with the negative status quo, we have a much greater influence than those who do.

Live with courage and integrity in your everyday life – be strong, kind, effective, grateful, forgiving, honorable, and polite – and set the example for others to follow.

Our effect on those we touch goes much deeper than we might imagine... sometimes shockingly so.

PS: My new course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you with this part of your life in much greater detail, with deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well. And *A Master's Course in Happiness* can help you to take charge of your habits and your life in ways you may not have thought possible.

And I'm now offering both at a lower price.

You can also give a gift of Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions and A Master's Course in Happiness for a loved one or friend, simply by using their email when you place your order.

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