Being Nice Makes For Happy Brain Waves

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By Liza Porteus

Can humans get high just from being nice?

Apparently so, according to researchers from Emory University in Georgia, who believe the brain finds happiness when its owner is nice to people and plays nice with others.

"When people cooperate together, it activates parts of their brains that are activated by other types of rewards," such as money, or even drugs, said Dr. Gregory Berns, a co-investigator of the study and associate professor of psychiatry at the Emory University School of Medicine.

Deep in the human brain, there is a mechanism that helps people make choices based on rewards they can receive. For example, someone may choose to work late in order to make more money. Or he can choose instead to go home, to spend more time with his family.

In both scenarios, there is a payoff and a consequence.

The Emory report was based on a study of 36 women, who played a game called "Prisoner’s Dilemma," which highlights how people act and cooperate in certain situations. The experiment found that most people, whether they are aware of it or not, wanted to get along, even if there was more reward in not doing so.

This cooperation caused satisfying activity in areas of the brain that get a high from drugs, good food or even love.

"It’s nice the brain seems at least to be wired to associate a reward for cooperation – it could have been the other way around," Berns said. "It’s exactly this type of thing that I think keeps society together."

The study may not be in line with a well-known theory highlighted in the blockbuster hit, A Beautiful Mind, in which Russell Crowe played John F. Nash, a talented mathematician who is struck by schizophrenia. Nash is known for his "Nash Equilibrium," which said humans are more likely not to cooperate in order to survive.

Nash’s work on game theory at the RAND Corporation in Virginia made him a leading expert on the Cold War conflict, and he won the 1994 Nobel Prize in Economic Science for his work.

Nash is currently traveling and was unavailable for comment.

Nash’s theory focused on one-time situations. But the Emory study suggests people will act differently during continuous interaction with other humans.

So humans will probably be less selfish in the short term, the Emory study suggests, if they know they have to see those same people again. And people will not just be nice because they have to, but because deep down, it actually makes them feel good.
The findings are important because, "in these types of interactions of exchanging favors, there’s always the temptation to go for the selfish, short-term gain," said James Rilling, principal investigator for the Emory study. But in reality, most people find acting beyond their own self-interest makes for happy brain waves.

"I think it helps to restrain short-term self-interested behavior, which would not be good for society at large," Rilling said.