

The Power of Two: Why Sharing Is Better

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My wife and I watch a lot of movies at home. It's one of our favorite pastimes. I also watch a fair number of movies by myself, if my wife is out of town or busy with something else. Both of these activities are enjoyable, and I like the occasional solitude.

But I enjoy the movies more when we watch them together, and I've often wondered why. It's not that we talk during the movie, or communicate in any way really. We're mostly silent, but we're side-by-side, and that in itself seems to enhance the experience of watching a movie.

Psychological scientists, it turns out, have noticed this phenomenon, too, and find it intriguing. Why would merely sharing an experience—simply knowing that you are experiencing the same thing I am—influence my emotions? Yale University's Erica Boothby, Margaret Clark and John Bargh decided to explore this question in the laboratory. They wanted to compare such shared, “social but silent” experiences with simply sharing space—me watching a movie and my wife doing the Sudoku, for example. They suspected that sharing the same experience would make that experience more intense.

To test this, they set up a fairly elaborate fake experiment involving two people at a time. They deliberately deceived volunteers, one at a time, into thinking they were tasting the same high-quality chocolate as another volunteer, who was actually a confederate in the study. At other times, the volunteers thought they were savoring the chocolate while the other person was looking at a work of art. So in each case the pair were occupying the same space, but sometimes sharing a pleasant experience and sometimes not. Afterward, the volunteers answered questions about the chocolate—its flavor and intensity and value—and about their own feelings. They also answered questions about the (still unrevealed) confederate: Are the two of you on the same wavelength? Do you like the other participant? Trust her?

The idea was to compare shared and unshared experiences, to see if mere sharing enhanced the subjective experience. And it did, clearly. Participants liked the chocolate significantly more when they believed they were sharing the chocolate experience with another person. They also said that the chocolate was more flavorful, even though all the chocolates were identical. What's more, the volunteers did not believe that their own experience was affected by the other person. All of this, taken together, demonstrates that a person's sensory experience can change, depending on whether it is shared or not. Shared experiences are more intense than unshared experiences.

Of course, there could be another explanation. It could be that sharing any experience is intrinsically pleasant. Perhaps the social bonding involved in sharing—perhaps this is what generates positive emotions, which we mistakenly attribute to the particular experience—of chocolate, for example. To further explore this dynamic, the Yale scientists designed another experiment to test the effects of an unpleasant experience. They replaced the savory chocolate with a bitter chocolate, to see if sharing improves an experience or amplifies it, good or bad.

They basically ran the same experiment again, but they also added some questions to explore why such effects might occur. They wondered, for example, if attention plays a role in enhancing subjective experience: Are people more absorbed in shared experiences? Or do we spend more effort thinking about what's going on in the other's mind? Do such cognitive dynamics enhance our emotions?

The results of the second study, reported in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science*, clarified these issues. First, the volunteers did experience the bitter chocolate as worse when the experience was shared, supporting the theory that sharing enhances emotions, for better or worse. They also reported being more absorbed in the experience when they were sharing it, even though it was unpleasant. And they were more likely to say they were on the same wavelength as the other chocolate eater, and that they were more focused on the other's thoughts and feelings.

These findings raise some provocative possibilities. Perhaps, when I watch a movie with my wife, she actually becomes part of my experience. That is, she becomes integrated into my sensory experience, so the movie and she are no longer competing for my attention and thought. We're both focused on the movie, but also highly aware of one another, and of each other's sensations and emotions. In this way, our overall experience of the moment is enhanced.

The scientists speculate that we humans may be built to automatically imagine and simulate how others see, hear, taste, smell and feel things, and that these imaginings shape our experiences of the world. We spend time every day in the company of others, but without explicit communication. Our lives unfold socially but silently, but even in the silence, good experiences get better and bad experiences get worse.

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