

FuturePundit

Future technological trends and their likely effects on human society, politics and evolution.

[« Low Vitamin D Boosts Heart Death Risks? | Go Read More Posts On FuturePundit](#)

November 16, 2009

Oxytocin Receptor Variants Linked To Empathy

In a sample of 200 students those with two copies of a particular allele of an oxytocin receptor appear to be better at reading emotional state in others.

CORVALLIS, Ore. – Researchers have discovered a genetic variation that may contribute to how empathetic a human is, and how that person reacts to stress. In the first study of its kind, a variation in the hormone/neurotransmitter oxytocin's receptor was linked to a person's ability to infer the mental state of others.

Interestingly, this same genetic variation also related to stress reactivity. These findings could have a significant impact in adding to the body of knowledge about the importance of oxytocin, and its link to conditions such as autism and unhealthy levels of stress.

Does the ability to read others cut or increase stress? I can see it cutting both ways. Sometimes obliviousness would be an advantage if everyone around you was anxious or depressed. Picking up on their signals would tend to bring you down. On the other hand, sometimes it is dangerous not to be able to read the emotional signals of others.

Can you read the minds of others?

One of the tests used to measure empathy included the "Reading the Mind in Eyes" test, created by Simon Baron-Cohen (cousin of actor/comedian Sacha Baron Cohen). Rodrigues said that this test is commonly used to discern how individuals can put themselves into the mind of another person, which overlaps with empathy, because it tests how well the participant can infer someone's emotional state by their eyes.

"In general, women do better on this test than men," Rodrigues said. "But we found a stark difference in both sexes based on the genetic variation." Those with the GG genetic variation were 22.7 percent less likely to make a mistake on the "Reading the Mind in the Eyes" test than the other individuals.

The article mentions a previous research report that found oxytocin spray given to autistics boosted the scores on behavioral and dispositional empathy measures. I'd like to know whether everyone would get a boost of greater social competence from a snort of oxytocin.

A variety of mental states have utility in different forms. Sometimes you just need to be a calculator. Sometimes you need to be a logic chopper. Other times you need to be able to read people like a bunch of open books. It'd be helpful to be able to shift around into different useful mental states depending on the circumstances.

By Randall Parker at 2009 November 16 11:26 PM [Brain Genetics](#)

Comments

Post a comment

Comments: