

Visiting people in hospital really does them good

By ANGELA EPSTEIN, Daily Mail, Last updated at 21:19 16 October 2006

Though it might seem like a chore to you, visiting a sick friend or relation in hospital really could make a difference to their health. Recent research has shown it's what your visit does to their brain that helps.

It's already well known that emotions have a powerful effect on a patient's health. A close relationship with a friend, partner or relative has been found to halve the risk of heart patients having another cardiac arrest — while a lack of a close confidant puts sufferers at a greater risk of having further heart attacks. Positive emotions have also been shown to increase a person's resistance to illness.

Now scientists have discovered why this might be so. The answer seems to lie in a group of brain cells known as mirror neurons. These are activated when we experience an emotion. However, more crucially, they also fire off when we watch others experience feelings we can identify with, leading us to mimic these sentiments and become infected by the mood. So during and after a visit from a loving and cheerful friend or relation, mirror neurons will stir similar positive feelings in the brain of the person in the hospital bed, lifting their spirits and making them feel better.

Mirror neurons enable us to copy each other, allowing us all — even babies — to get our emotional cues from others. Dr Matthew Ratcliffe, senior lecturer in philosophy at Durham University, says that mirror neurons partly explain why we are so influenced by other people's gestures, actions and general manner. 'By being with someone who has a smiling face — such as

a hospital visitor — mirror neurons motivate a similar response in our own brain, leading us to make a similar gesture and even directing us towards a similar emotional reaction,' he says.

In the same way, if we are with someone who is awkward or socially clumsy, mirror neurons cause us to begin to behave in a similar fashion. According to Daniel Goleman, author of *Social Intelligence: The New Science Of Human Relationships*, mirror neurons enable emotions to spread like a contagion, allowing one person to infect another with their mood, particularly if these feelings are strongly expressed. 'The most potent exchanges occur with those people with whom we spend the greatest amount of time, day in day out. Particularly those we care about the most,' he says. 'My hostility bumps up your blood pressure, your nurturing love lowers mine. Potentially, we are each other's biological allies — or enemies.'

Where brains lack mirror neurons, it is difficult for a person to establish an emotional link with others.

The University of California research suggests that we were genetically programmed to act this way to encourage sociability, which was vital for survival in prehistoric times.

Ronnie Nathan, Chief Barker of the Variety Club, endorses the idea that love and kindness can help us recover from ill health. So even if you have nothing to say, your presence at a sick friend's bedside is enough.