
Empathy and Interpersonal Mindfulness

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Key Topics

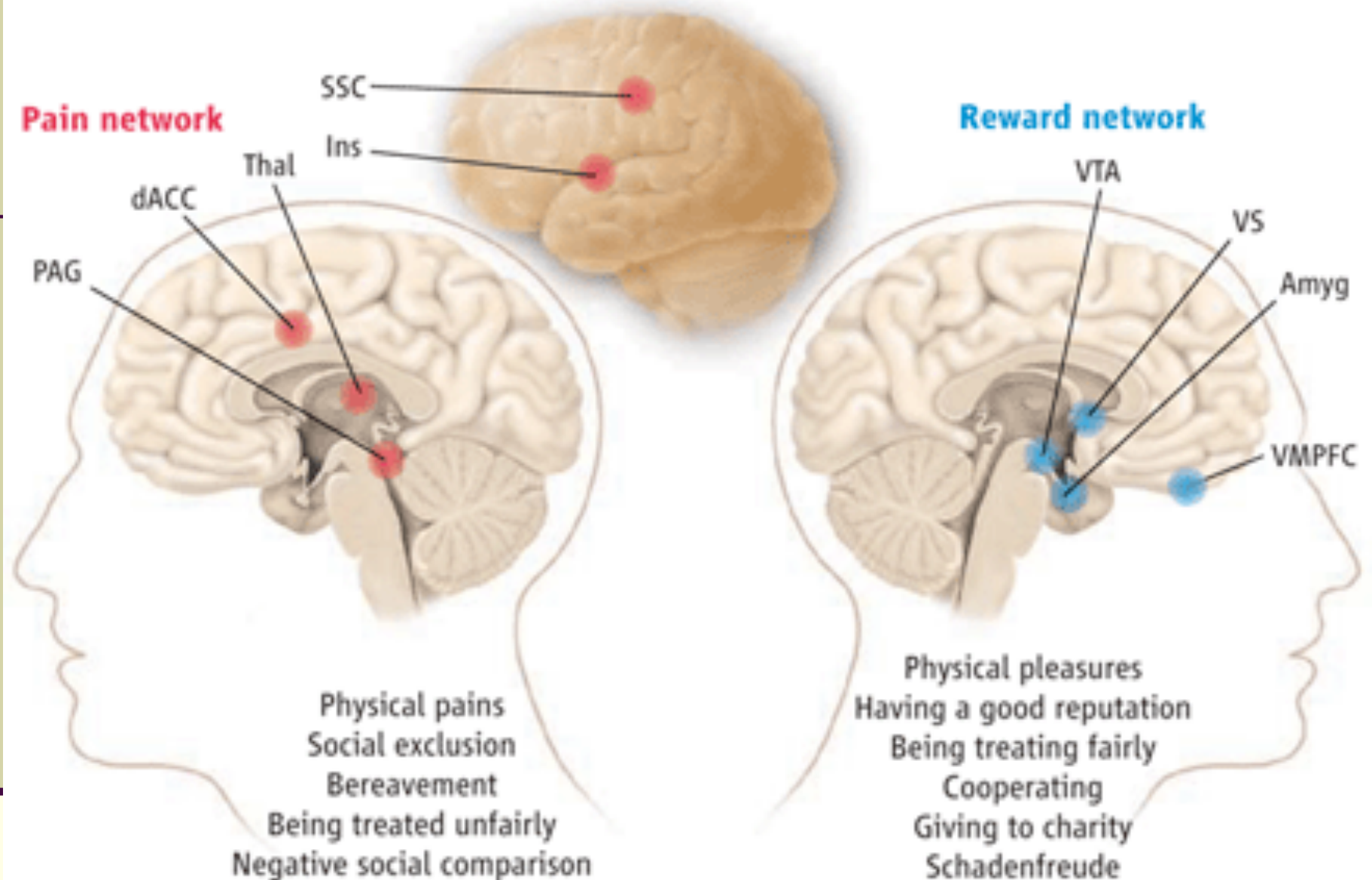
- **Two Wolves in the Heart**
- **Evolution of “Us” and “Them”**
- **Feeling Strong**
- **Healthy Assertiveness**
- **Neural Circuits of Empathy**
- **Integrating Empathy and Assertiveness**
- **Closing Discussion**

Evolution of Approaching and Avoiding

- 3.5+ billion years of life
- Crucial functions: approach what promotes survival and avoid what threatens it
 - Motile protozoa will move toward a sucrose gradient and away from a toxic one.
 - Animals approach food, mates, and shelter; they flee from or resist predators and natural hazards.
 - Social animals approach caregivers, allies, and higher social status; fight rivals, avoid “alphas,” and resist lower status.
- Signals and rewards:
 - Pleasure and pain; “hedonic tone”
 - Emotion

Evolution of Bonding, Cooperation, and Love

- Mammals and birds have bigger brains than reptiles and fish do because they raise their young and often pair-bond.
 - Monogamous species have the biggest brains.
- The more social the primate group, the bigger the brain
 - Groomers get more of a stress relief benefit than groomees.
- Human hunter-gatherer bands competed with other bands; the ones with the best teamwork usually won.
 - Genetically, it makes sense to altruistically sacrifice your own life if that promotes the survival of others with whom you share genes.



Pain network: Dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (dACC), insula (Ins), somatosensory cortex (SSC), thalamus (Thal), and periaqueductal gray (PAG).

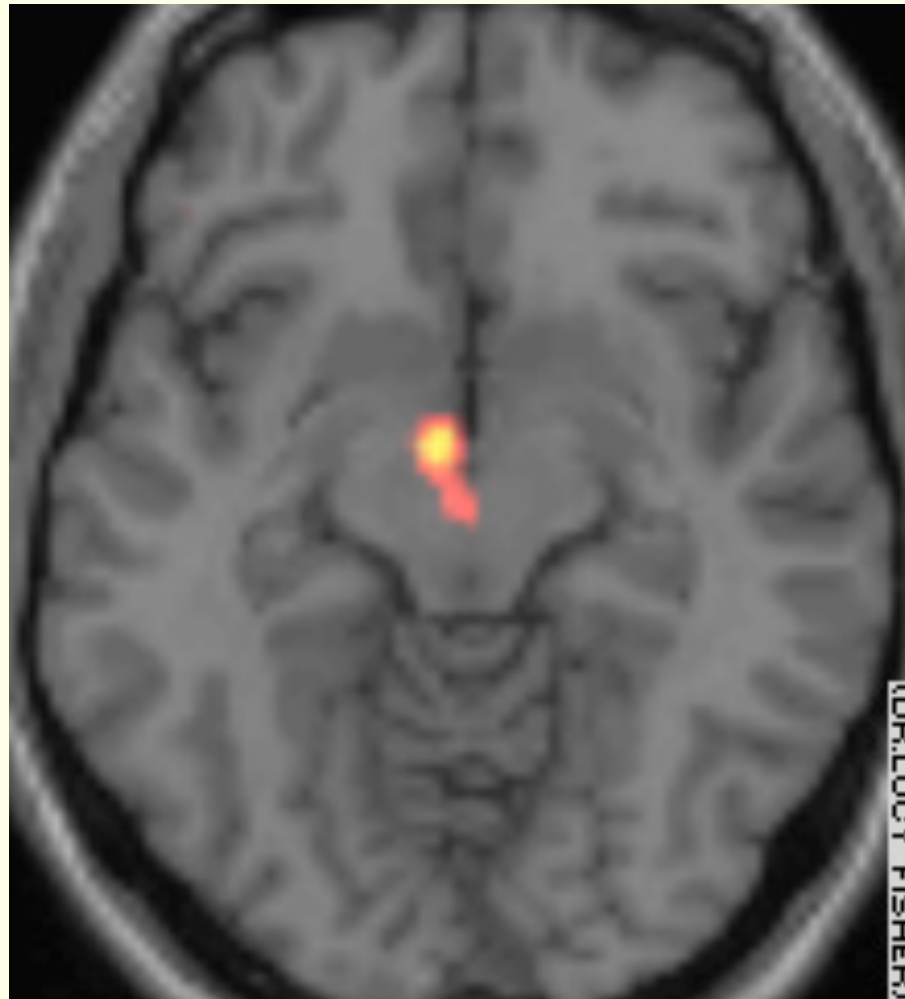
Reward network: Ventral tegmental area (VTA), ventral striatum (VS), ventromedial prefrontal cortex (VMPFC), and amygdala (Amyg).

K. Sutliff, in Lieberman & Eisenberger, 2009, *Science*, 323:890-891

The Brain in Lust and Love

- When we see someone we are infatuated with or love, the tegmentum on top of the brainstem sends dopamine to the caudate nucleus (basal ganglia); caudate signals: “Send more!”
- Being rejected in love activates the insula, also involved in the experience of physical pain.
- Lust activates hypothalamus and amygdala: drives, emotion, and arousal
- Over time, the intensity of rewards settles down; they can remain powerful even if more diffuse.

The Rewards of Love



Oxytocin

- Promotes bonding between mothers and children, and between mates, keeping those kids alive
- In women, triggers let-down reflex in nursing, and tend-and-befriend behaviors during stress
- In both women and men it dampens stress response, and it feels pleasurable, relaxed, a “rightness”
- Rewards all bonding behaviors
- Triggered by:
 - Nipple stimulation
 - Orgasm
 - Physical contact (especially skin to skin)
 - Moving together harmoniously (dancing)
 - Warm feelings of rapport or love (lovingkindness); devotion
 - Imagination of these

Grandchildren!



Being for Yourself

- Moral and ethical teachings tell us to be compassionate and kind toward all beings. And that whatever we do to the world affects us, and whatever we do to ourselves affects the world.
- You are one of the “all beings!” And kindness to yourself benefits the world, while hurting yourself harms the world.
- It’s a general moral principle that the more power you have over someone, the greater your duty is to use that power wisely. Well, who is the one person in the world you have the greatest power over? It’s your future self. You hold that life in your hands, and what it will be depends on how you care for it.
- Consider yourself as an innocent child, as deserving of care and happiness as any other.

Feeling Strong

- Relaxed, resting in awareness
- Feeling the strength in awareness itself, never sullied or rattled by what passes through it.
- Sense the vitality in your body
- Recall a time you felt really strong, and sense those feelings.
- Energy and strength in your breathing . . . in arms and legs . . . in your whole being . . .
- A spacious strength that lets others flow through
- In relationship and at peace
- Relaxed in a spacious world; no need for struggle

Us and Them

- Core evolutionary strategy: within-group cooperation, and between-group aggression.
- Both capacities and tendencies are hard-wired into our brains, ready for activation. And there is individual variation.
- Our biological nature is much more inclined toward cooperative sociability than toward aggression and indifference or cruelty. We are just very reactive to social distinctions and threats.
- That reactivity is intensified and often exploited by economic, cultural, and religious factors.
- Two wolves in your heart:
 - Love sees a vast circle in which all beings are “us.”
 - Hate sees a small circle of “us,” even only the self.

Which one will you feed?

In between-family fights, the baboon's 'I' expands to include all of her close kin; in within-family fights, it contracts to include only herself.

This explanation serves for baboons as much as for the Montagues and Capulets.

Baboon Metaphysics: The Evolution of a Social Mind,
by Dorothy Cheney and Robert Seyfarth

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Healthy Assertiveness

What it is: Speaking your truth and pursuing your aims in the context of relationships

What supports it:

- Being on your own side
- Self-compassion
- Naming the truth to yourself
- Refuges: reason, love, nature, teachings, community
- Taking care of the big things so you don't grumble about the little ones
- Health and vitality

Healthy Assertiveness: How to Do It

- Know your aims; stay focused on the prize; lose battles to win wars
- Ground in empathy, compassion, and love
- Practice unilateral virtue
- Communicate for yourself, not to change others
 - Wise Speech; be especially mindful of tone
 - NVC: “When X happens, I feel Y because I need Z.”
 - Dignity and gravity
 - Distinguish empathy building (“Y”) from policy-making
- If appropriate, negotiate solutions
 - Establish facts as best you can (“X”)
 - Find the deepest wants (“Z”)
 - Focus mainly on “from now on”
 - Make clear plans, agreements
 - Scale relationships to their actual foundations

What Is Empathy?

- Sensing, feeling, and understanding how it is for the other person
- Both a bodily resonance and a conceptual understanding
- Empathy is usually communicated, though often tacitly.
- We can give empathy, we can receive it, and we can ask for it.

Neural Substrates of Empathy

- Three *simulating* systems:
 - Actions: “mirror” systems; temporal-parietal junction
 - Feelings: resonating emotionally; insula
 - Thoughts: “theory of mind”; prefrontal cortex
- These systems interact with each other through association and active inquiry
- Automatic, continual re-creation of traces of others’ experience

Reflections about Empathy

- You're more likely to get empathy if you're:
 - Open, present
 - Honest, real, authentic
 - Reasonably clear
 - Responsible for your own experience
 - Taking it in when you feel felt
- Empathy can be negotiated:
 - Name it as a topic in the relationship
 - Follow NVC format: "When X happens, I feel Y, because I need Z. So I request _____."
 - Stay with it.

Empathy Skills

- Pay attention.
- Be open.
- Read emotion in face and eyes.
- Sense beneath the surface.
- Drop aversion (judgments, distaste, fear, anger, withdrawal).
- Investigate actively.
- Express empathic understanding:
 - Reflect the content
 - Resonate with the tone and implicit material
 - Questions are fine
 - Offer respect and wise speech throughout

“Anthem”

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in
That's how the light gets in*

Leonard Cohen