Our Brain Enjoys Making Friends

Is it important to have friends? Why do we enjoy spending time with them? Do we learn differently around our friends?

Neuroscience research is helping us to answer some of these questions by looking at the way our brain allows us to, and benefits from, interacting with other humans. Part of the reason why human brains are so complex is that our interactions with others are so complex; we are social creatures and have been living in groups for thousands of years.

In fact, research shows that human beings who are socially isolated not only report feelings of very low mood, but they also get sick more often. Many brain functions are involved in allowing us to have healthy human interactions.

One such function is empathy. Empathy allows us to understand and respond to the emotional experiences of others.
A key part of empathy is “theory of mind,” the ability to understand other’s feelings, beliefs, thoughts, and intentions. Without realizing it, we use this ability every time we interact with our family, friends, classmates, and teachers: in order to have healthy social interactions, we have to understand that they think and feel differently than we do. But we are not born with this ability. It is not until we are between 4 and 5 years that theory of mind starts developing, and this leads to many changes in our behavior, such as learning new social rules and being able to play more complex games with friends.

Research also suggests that learning in a classroom with teachers and friends is more effective than learning on your own. After all, all of

us tend to remember things that were taught by our favorite and most engaging teachers. This shows the long-lasting effect of empathy on learning.

Researchers around the world are spending more and more time studying friendship. There is evidence showing that our brain responds more strongly to friends than strangers, even if the stranger has more in common with us. Spending time with friends has been shown to cause more activity in the parts of the brain that makes us feel good – the reward circuits. What is more, having long-lasting valuable social relations, including friendships, and an active social life appears to protect the brain from illnesses later in life.

In summary, the contribution of brain to human social interactions is complex and not yet fully understood. What is clear now is that our brain enjoys making friends and that spending time with them can have very positive effects on learning, health, and life in general.