

TIP

# How to Get in Sync With Someone

By Malia Wollan

Nov. 24, 2020

“Don’t talk,” says Natalie Sebanz, a professor of cognitive science at Central European University in Austria. “The verbal stuff gets in the way.” Sebanz and two colleagues conducted an experiment in Hungary, where the country’s largest minority, the Roma, have long suffered discrimination. The researchers recruited non-Roma subjects and, after evaluating their bias against the Roma, had them walk silently around a large lecture hall alongside a Roma person; they did this for three minutes either in sync, matching footfalls or without any coordination. The subjects who synced their strides with a Roma reported less prejudice and stereotyping toward both their walking partner and the Roma as a group. “You tend to like people more and become more prosocial if you engage in synchronous behavior with them,” Sebanz says.

Walking is an easy way to get in sync, but researchers have shown that it also works with other rhythmic activities, including finger-tapping, dancing, marching and drumming. “It doesn’t have to last very long,” says Sebanz, who suggests aiming for a few minutes. If you’re trying to coordinate your steps with those of a stranger, or someone not in your pandemic pod, give them space. If you can see their feet, you’re close enough. (Finding a shared gait will be easier with someone who has similar leg length as you.)

Conjunctive movement can connect you to strangers and intimates alike. “Say you’re in a couple and you get in an argument,” Sebanz says. “Go for a silent walk together.” If you’re experiencing discord or discomfort with someone, or toward a category of people, and you aren’t able to walk with them in the flesh, close your eyes and visualize doing so in lock step (which Sebanz and her colleagues also found reduced prejudice).

Researchers aren’t exactly sure why synchrony unifies humans, but study after study shows that experiencing it with others makes you like them more and act more cooperatively with them. One hypothesis is that such mirrored behavior blurs boundaries between self and other in a kind of neural coupling between brains. Synchronicity is seen across the animal kingdom too — perhaps humans walking in sync together is not so different from fireflies concurrently flashing or flocks of birds turning in unison.

A version of this article appears in print on , Page 23 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: How to Get in SyncWith Someone

/