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Paul Zak: How Do You Medulla?

By **Sophia Kercher** Thursday, May 19 2011 Comments (0)

At conferences it's not unusual for Dr. Paul Zak to have people lining up to hug him. The neuroeconomist is a leading expert on the hormone oxytocin, aka "the cuddle chemical."

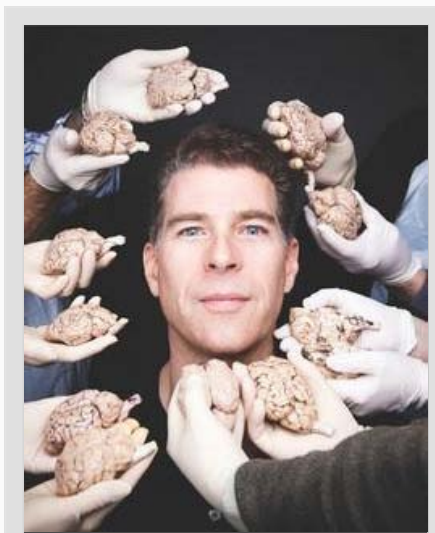
Along with his preference for hugging strangers, the Claremont Graduate University economics professor is known for discovering that social networking stimulates the release of oxytocin — the essence of affection and empathy — in our brains. Oxytocin is a hormone found in mammals that can be measured in blood or saliva.

"That Tweeting or posting on Facebook causes the release of oxytocin is sort of shocking," Zak says. He explains that our brains have not evolved to a point where interacting with friends or loved ones in person is clearly differentiated from posting on their Facebook wall.

"We really want to connect, we are the connecting species, and this is just another way to do it," he explains.

Zak coined the term "neuroeconomics" in 2001 and became a founder of the field, which combines economics with psychology, biology and neurology. Raised in Southern California by an engineer and a former nun, Zak grew up tinkering in his dad's lab at UC Santa Barbara. He went on to earn his Ph.D. in economics from Penn and participate in postdoctoral training in neuroimaging at Harvard.

He has caused a stir in the media with his unusual experiments, which include examining the levels of the cuddle chemical at a wedding by taking blood samples from all the participants (the bride registered the highest levels of the hormone, followed by her family).



Paul Zak

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VOICE DEAL OF THE DAY LA WEEKLY

Zak also is known for his California good looks. In 2005 Wired named him one of its Top 10 Sexiest Geeks. A colleague, Jorge Barraza, a postdoctoral fellow at Claremont, says Zak is embarrassed by his status as a sex symbol. "But I think his wife kind of likes it," Barraza says with a smile.

Around campus, the nickname Dr. Love trails Zak. He hasn't fought the label. His cellphone ringtone plays KISS' "Dr. Love" and he regularly signs his emails with that moniker. His license plate reads OXYTOSN.

He jokes that it makes him less aggressive on the road.

Zak wasn't always so certain of his interest in the chemical. Before his research, oxytocin was thought to be limited to forming connections between mothers and babies. At the time a colleague warned Zak that studying the "female hormone" would be career-ending. How wrong he was. After 10 years of work by Zak, the chemical is recognized as a trigger for trust, generosity and empathy — among both genders.

"If I can increase the love in the world a tiny bit by being a crazy guy out there, I'm thrilled," Zak says.

But he is hardly crazy. He is calm and reserved, with big ideas, which he methodically addresses in his work.

"In the laboratory we basically control the environment as much as possible. We have [participants] do one thing that changes the way their brain works and we control everything else," Zak explains.

"If one of our goals in life is to be happier, it's all about our relationships," he says. "Sartre's quote, 'Hell is other people,' is wrong." According to Dr. Love, other people are more like heaven.

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