

contact high

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My first encounter with the expression *contact high* was in California. I'd never heard it before, but I understood it immediately. The term was coined in the underground and hippie scene and has been around since the 1960s (LANDY 1971: 56). Even without actually taking drugs yourself, you can get high through being close to someone who has taken a psychedelic drug and is high. Highs can be infectious...

The Hippy Dictionary describes the term *contact high* as follows: "Getting high without using drugs merely by being in contact with someone who is under the influence of drugs. It is a phenomenon that can actually be experienced if one is sensitive to the feeling of others. It helps if one is familiar with the actual experience of being stoned on drugs." (MCCLEARY 2004: 112)

But is there an explanation for this phenomenon that can occur frequently in certain circles? How does it work? Telepathically? Psychologically? What takes place in our neurons?

To be high is to experience an extraordinary state of consciousness. This state can be induced by a wide range of psychoactive drugs, but it is apparently known to occur without the use of drugs too. That would imply that humans are genetically disposed to an altered state of mind or consciousness – being high is a latent, potential experience, a kind of neuronal matrix built into the human nervous system. All you need is something to trigger it, a catalyst, and that catalyst can be of a pharmacological or non-pharmacological nature; it can take the form of a chemical or external stimulus.

We all know the feeling of how other people's moods seem to "rub off on us." We are drawn in or we let ourselves be swept away. A high, like laughter, can be infectious.

The *contact high* phenomenon is widespread and there are so many anecdotes describing it that we can assume there is indeed something to it. Unfortunately, no systematic scientific studies currently exist to confirm it.

Psychotherapists and psychiatrists who therapeutically administer psychoactive drugs to their patients are also familiar with this phenomenon because they have frequently experienced it themselves. A therapist is often "pulled into" his or her patient's LSD trip.

The contact high phenomenon is most commonly observed in connection with psychedelic substances (THC, LSD, magic mushrooms, mescaline) and empathogenic drugs (MDMA, 2C-B, and other phenethylamines). It doesn't appear to occur with cocaine, speed, or heroin, and least of all with alcohol.

When we recognize another person's altered state, we might remember similar experiences of our own, recalling them so vividly that we believe we are high ourselves. In any case, a contact high has to do with memory and recognition, with our cognitive system. We recognize things we know, and this is what gives these things meaning.

In a state of "sobriety" we might recognize a certain odor or music experienced while stoned or tripping. This memory can cause us to remember that altered state and re-experience it, albeit it less intensely. If you light incense and then get stoned, the experience is stored in your olfactory memory. The odor is tied to the experience and when you smell the same odor again, the cognitively associated feelings come back too. The odor becomes a signal for being high – a classic case of olfactory conditioning.

A contact high is a striking and stimulating experience. Usually it comes unexpectedly: it just happens. Even if one has experienced a contact high before, it doesn't necessarily mean that person will get high whenever he or she meets someone who is stoned or tripping (something to the tune of: "I get stoned and you get the munchies.") And it is uncertain whether or not there is such a thing as a deliberately induced contact high.

Some people seem to have a talent for getting a contact high because with some people it happens more frequently, with others hardly ever, very rarely, or never.

The term "erlernter Rausch" (learned high), which was introduced as a scientific theory by the ethnologist Andrea Blätter, is worth mentioning in this context. Blätter's theory suggests that a drug experience not only involves cognitive activity but also the cultural environment. This produces a model for re-experiencing an altered state of consciousness. It follows that different cultures can have completely different models induced by the same drug. So a contact high can be triggered by a so-called learned high. Thus, a contact high can occur between two people because they share the same model of getting high.

The contact high phenomenon is being discussed more and more in scientific circles. The general public, however, has had little exposure to it thus far, but now

there is a film that has turned this phenomenon into a cinematic experience. The concept of contact high is explained at the outset of the film and continues as a leitmotif throughout the rest of the movie. In the spectacular finale the borders between high and "merely" contact high become blurred.

What fascinates me about the film is the matter-of-fact way it deals with drugs, as if they were the most normal thing in the world. I find this realistic because this has been the case for quite some time in our society. In a culture that dopes its cyclists, dope consumption is everywhere. Today, getting stoned is as much a part of our culture as pizza or hamburgers.

This film is a realistic look at how we deal with drugs in today's world. I find the psychedelic scenes realistic too... The only thing that is exaggerated is the frequency of contact highs; in real life they aren't as common as they are in the film. Perhaps this film will serve to sensitize a broader public to the contact high phenomenon, allowing more people to enjoy it as a learned high. Maybe it is only possible to truly appreciate this film if you have had a contact high or smoked yourself... In any case, the film gives a whole new take on world of mind-altering substances and getting high.

Although the film sometimes reminds us of Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, it is free of middle-class stereotypes and other film clichés. It is clearly a trippy movie, but it is also one that introduces new aspects and ways of looking at drugs. May it infect its audiences and give them a contact high.

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