How oxytocin, the ‘breastfeeding hormone,’ makes social interactions possible

Oxytocin, this molecule that’s classically associated with child birth and breastfeeding, is released in all kinds of settings in which humans have positive social interactions, and it plays the role of a safety-signaling molecule. Part of this story is that we have this built-in ability to come together as human beings to form relationships with people we have no direct genetic relationship to, and we can extract value from those relationships.

Maybe there’s a reason why people behave nicely even when they don’t have to. There is a rich literature in social animals showing that oxytocin allows members of the same species to identify burrow-mates. This is generally done by smell.

Human beings, I thought, might do the same kind of thing. We don’t initially smell each other, but we recognize through all kinds of signals like body language that someone is safe or not safe. And we can affiliate and get all the value of relationships, except as human beings we do it very broadly.

One of my colleagues actually said, “Paul, this is the world’s stupidest idea. It’s a career-ending decision.” I said, okay, maybe, but there is a big animal literature, and there must be a way to measure oxytocin in humans.

He said, “It’s irrelevant, just a female hormone,” indicating that if this is for women, it can’t be that important.

This was a guy, by the way. And I said, “Yeah, but men’s brains make oxytocin too. There must be a reason why.”

The GLP aggregated and excerpted this blog/article to reflect the diversity of news, opinion and analysis. Read full, original post: The Molecule Behind the Golden Rule