

LET'S SHAKE ON IT...

Dead fish, sweaty palms, bone crusher – we know all the varieties; of handshake that is. And what's more, we instantly categorise people by their handshake type. In fact, it can be hard not to. The handshake forms such a powerful first impression that in the business world it can make or break a deal even before the details of the transaction have taken



place. But even for us regular folk, the outcome of this first approach can influence whether they become our mates or not. So, how do we make a good first impression?

New neuroscience research, from the Beckman Institute in the USA, examined how our brains respond to the handshake. Their results revealed that just the act of proffering your hand to a stranger is enough to form a good impression, and pave the way for further positive relations.

To discover this, researchers asked male and female study participants to watch videos of animated human characters meeting for the first time in a business setting. Two types of interaction were shown: those in which the animated interactions began with a handshake and those that did not. While participants watched the videos, their brains were monitored using a powerful neuroscience technique called functional MRI (fMRI). This technique is a special type of brain scan that allows researchers to observe the brain while subjects perform a task or experience an emotion. In this experiment, it allowed scientists to identify locations in the brain that responded to the interactions and the handshake.

Previous research has found that there are special areas of the brain, called the social cognition network, that are known to be active when we are assessing the intentions of others. Not surprisingly, the researchers found that these brain areas were active when participants viewed either the handshake or no-handshake interactions. Makes sense – we would be trying to figure out the intentions of a new acquaintance, whether we shook their hand or not.

But the really telling bit was that the researchers found that the handshake had a positive effect on another region of the brain, called the nucleus accumbens (-a-'come-benz). This region of the brain becomes active when we receive a reward or do something we like (Think: getting money or eating ice cream), and it was activated more in the interactions preceded by a handshake. That's right: it looks like our brains interpret the handshake as a wee reward. Just imagine if you met someone new and they greeted you with money! Keep that in mind the next time you want to make a positive first impression.

*"If you give a handshake to the leopard, next time he will come for an embrace."
- African proverb*

Reference:

<http://www.beckman.uiuc.edu/news/2012/10/dolcoshandshake>