Paying It Forward

Adapted by Personal Safety Nets® from Psychology Today, July 18, 2006

As life dragged on after her best friend Lynda Drabek's funeral, Charlene Moser took a novel approach to keeping the pain at bay: She carried out small acts of kindness. The good deeds she chose—paying for the drive-thru customer behind her, for instance—were things Lynda, a lifelong altruist, had done. "She would go through her address book, pick someone at random and write a card to them—no occasion, just because," Moser recalls.

At first, being the Good Samaritan wasn't easy. Both recipients and intermediaries—the drive-thru cashiers, for instance—were suspicious of her motives. Still, any resistance paled compared to the satisfaction Moser felt when someone smiled or thanked her for her efforts. But are these acts just nice deeds, or can altruism really create lasting satisfaction?

In 2005, Stanford University psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky decided to put the kindness-fulfillment connection to the test. She asked students to carry out five weekly "random acts of kindness" of their choice, anything from buying a Big Mac for a homeless person to helping a younger sibling with schoolwork.

Her results indicate the Scrooge effect is no myth. The students reported higher levels of happiness than a control group, with students who performed all five kind acts in one day reaping the biggest rewards by the end of the six-week study period. Previous studies have found that altruistic people tend to be happy, but Lyubomirsky's was the first to establish that good deeds are actually the direct cause of an increase in well-being.

Why is being generous such a mood-booster? While hard-and-fast answers are elusive, the main reason is that it gives people a strong sense they're doing something that matters. "There are a lot of positive social consequences to being kind—other people appreciate you, they're grateful [1] and they might reciprocate," Lyubomirsky says. All of these responses, she adds, are likely to make your happiness cup run over. In another study, she found that people who felt most strongly that others appreciated their efforts reported the biggest boost.

New Jersey rabbi Shmuel Greenbaum can testify to the ways kind acts reshape the self-image. After his wife, Shoshana, was killed by a suicide bomber in Israel in 2001, Greenbaum decided to respond by carrying out small acts of kindness each day—and gradually felt his anger and apathy dissolve, replaced by a strong sense of purpose. "Being kind helps you feel in control," Greenbaum says. "By doing a good deed, you're saying, 'Here's something I can do to change the world.' "

Of course, real-world kindness bears little resemblance to sunshine-and-lollipops cliches. For starters, not all good deeds promise equal returns. Passing out smiley-face stickers or leaving lucky pennies on the sidewalk may not yield fulfillment, according to Jonathan Haidt, a University of Virginia psychologist and author of *The Happiness Hypothesis*. Instead, he recommends choosing deeds that strengthen existing social ties, such as driving to visit your grandmother. "If you do a random act of kindness for a stranger and it's a one-shot deal, there's much less likelihood that you're going to see any benefit," he says. "It's not the altruism per se that's important. It's really all about building relationships."

Lyubomirsky's work reveals another potential kindness pitfall: Like almost any other activity, being nice gets boring after a while. In a companion study, she found that participants who varied their acts of kindness—volunteering at a library one day and hosting a surprise party for a friend the next, for instance—reported bigger increases in mood than those who repeated the same act over and over. "You need variety or else it gets monotonous," she says. "It becomes a chore, like doing the same run every day." To experience kindness as a natural high rather than drudgery, she suggests brainstorming creative, unexpected good deeds, like surprising your nephew with a new Super Soaker or returning to your old high school to visit a teacher who inspired you.

It's easy to resolve to be a kinder person, but translating intention into reality is another matter entirely. To make sure your commitment doesn't weaken, Haidt advises using a marathoner's strategy: partner up. "Try joining a volunteer outfit where you form ties. That's easier to sustain than being a 'kindness guerrilla' working on your own."

Though Charlene Moser started out as an underground altruist, she eventually broadened her vision, wanting

others to share in the joy she felt from doing good deeds. Three years ago, she founded Lynda's Legacy, a nonprofit organization dedicated to encouraging people to carry out acts of kindness.

Need a Nudge?

Try one of these small acts to start your own kindness campaign:

- Pay the toll of the driver behind you.
- Shovel your neighbor's sidewalk after a snowstorm.
- Call or visit an older family member.
- Bake cookies for a neighbor.
- Give an extra-large tip.

CONTACT US

Unless otherwise indicated, all content on this site is licensed under a Creative Commons 3.0 US License.

Source URL: https://personalsafetynets.com/content/paying-it-forward-0

Links
[1] http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/gratitude