

Being naughty or nice may boost willpower, physical endurance

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New research from Harvard University suggests that moral actions may increase our capacity for willpower and physical endurance. Study participants who did good deeds -- or even just imagined themselves helping others -- were better able to perform a subsequent task of physical endurance.

The research, published in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, shows a similar or even greater boost in [physical strength](#) following dastardly deeds.

Researcher Kurt Gray, a doctoral student in psychology at Harvard, explains these effects as a self-fulfilling prophecy in morality.

"People perceive those who do good and evil to have more efficacy, more willpower, and less sensitivity to discomfort," Gray says. "By perceiving themselves as good or evil, people embody these perceptions, actually becoming more capable of physical endurance."

Gray's findings run counter to the notion that only those blessed with heightened willpower or self-control are capable of heroism, suggesting instead that simply attempting heroic deeds can confer personal power.

"Gandhi or Mother Teresa may not have been born with extraordinary self-control, but perhaps came to possess it through trying to help others," says Gray, who calls this effect "moral transformation" because it suggests that moral deeds have the power to transform people from

average to exceptional.

Moral transformation has many implications, he says. For example, it suggests a new technique for enhancing self-control when dieting: help others before being faced with temptation.

"Perhaps the best way to resist the donuts at work is to donate your change in the morning to a worthy cause," Gray says.

It may also suggest new treatments for anxiety or depression, he says: Helping others may be the best way of regaining control of your own life.

Gray's findings are based on two studies. In the first, participants were given a dollar and told either to keep it or to donate it to charity; they were then asked to hold up a 5 lb. weight for as long as they could. Those who donated to charity could hold the weight up for almost 10 seconds longer, on average.

In a second study, participants held a weight while writing fictional stories of themselves either helping another, harming another, or doing something that had no impact on others. As before, those who thought about doing good were significantly stronger than those whose actions didn't benefit other people.

But surprisingly, the would-be malefactors were even stronger than those who envisioned doing good deeds.

"Whether you're saintly or nefarious, there seems to be power in moral events," Gray says. "People often look at others who do great or evil deeds and think, 'I could never do that' or 'I wouldn't have the strength to do that.' But in fact, this research suggests that physical strength may be an effect, not a cause, of moral acts."

Provided by Harvard University

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