

Good intentions ease pain, add to pleasure: study

January 18 2012

A nurse's tender loving care really does ease the pain of a medical procedure, and grandma's cookies really do taste better, if we perceive them to be made with love - suggests newly published research by a University of Maryland psychologist. The findings have many real-world applications, including in medicine, relationships, parenting and business.

"The way we read another persons intentions changes our physical experience of the world," says UMD Assistant Professor Kurt Gray, author of "The Power of Good Intentions," newly published online ahead of print in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*. Gray directs the Maryland Mind Perception and [Morality](#) Lab.

"The results confirm that good intentions - even misguided ones - can sooth pain, increase pleasure and make things taste better," the study concludes. It describes the ability of benevolence to improve physical experience as a "vindication for the power of good."

While it seems clear that good and evil intentions can change the experience of social events - think of a reaction to a mean-spirited, cutting remark compared to gentle teasing spoken with a smile - this study shows that physical events are influenced by the perceived contents of another person's mind."It seems we also use the intentions of others as a guide for basic physical experience," Gray writes in the journal.

SPECIFIC FINDINGS

The power of good intentions to shape physical experience was demonstrated in three separate experiments: the first examined pain, the second examined pleasure, and the third examined the taste of a sweet treat.

PAIN: EXPERIMENT 1. Does kindness reduce pain? Three groups of participants received identical electric shocks at the hand of a partner. Members of the first group were in the "accidental" condition: They thought they were being shocked without their partner's awareness. The second, or "malicious condition, group thought they were being shocked on purpose, for no good reason. The final group ("benevolent" condition), also thought they were being shocked on purpose, but because another person was trying to help them win money. The result: Participants in the "benevolent" group experienced significantly less pain than both the "malicious" and "accident" participants. This finding should "provide relief to doctors and even those caring parents who are sometimes compelled to inflict pain on their charges for their [charges] own good," Gray writes in the paper.

PLEASURE: EXPERIMENT 2. Do good intentions also heighten the experience of pleasure? People sat on an electric massage pad in an easy chair which was repeatedly turned on - either by an indifferent computer or a caring partner. Although the massages were identical, Gray found that partner massages caused significantly more pleasure than those administered by a computer. "Although computers may be more efficient than humans at many things, pleasure is still better coming from another person," the study concludes.

TASTE: EXPERIMENT 3. Does benevolence improve how things taste? Subjects were given candy in a package with a note attached. For the benevolent group, the note read: "I picked this just for you. Hope it

makes you happy. The non-benevolent (indifferent) version read: "Whatever. I just don't care. I just picked it randomly." The candy not only tasted better to the benevolent group, but it also tasted significantly sweeter. "Perceived benevolence not only improves the experience of pain and pleasure, but can also make things taste better," the study concludes.

APPLICATIONS

The findings of these studies suggest clear applications. For example, the first experiment suggests that medical personal should make sure to brush up on their bedside manner. "How painful people find medical procedures depends in part upon the perceived intentions of the person administering it," says Gray. "Getting blood taken from stony-faced nurse hurts more than from an empathic one."

For those in relationships, which is pretty much everyone, the message is to make sure your partner, sibling, friend, etc. knows you care. Gray notes, "It's not enough just to do good things for your partner - they have to know you want them to feel good. Just imagine saying, 'fine, here's your stupid hug,' - hardly comforting." The same would also seem to apply to cooking, where emphasizing your concern about the experience of the diners makes things taste better.

Relatedly, these results also apply to business strategy. "It's no surprise," says Gray, "that food companies always pair their products with kindly old grandfathers and smiling mothers - thinking of this make believe benevolence likely increases our enjoyment."

The study also suggests the general benefits of thinking that others mean well - including God. "Painful events attributed to a benevolent God should seem to hurt less than those attributed to a vengeful God, says Gray. "To the extent that we view others as benevolent instead of

malicious, the harms they inflict upon us should hurt less, and the good things they do for us should cause more pleasure," the paper concludes. "Stolen parking places cut less deep and home-cooked meals taste better when we think well of others."

More information: "The Power of Good Intentions: Perceived Benevolence Soothes Pain, Increases Pleasure, and Improves Taste," Kurt Gray, *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, [doi 10.1177/1948550611433470](https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550611433470)

Provided by University of Maryland

Citation: Good intentions ease pain, add to pleasure: study (2012, January 18) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-01-good-intentions-ease-pain-pleasure.html>

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