Is it possible to be too 'nice' for your own good?

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Helping others. Credit: twitter.com/mattwi1s0n/Flickr, CC BY-SA

Niceness is a topic that tends to fundamentally divide people. Should you

put yourself first, stand up for yourself and get back at people who've wronged you or should you put others first and turn the other cheek when attacked? Is being nice more likely to make us happy in the long run – leading to fewer regrets and closer relationships?

Researchers have suggested that [a "loneliness epidemic"](link) is currently spreading across the Western world, arguing it can be [as bad for health as smoking or obesity](link). With such clear evidence of the importance of [social conceitedness for our well-being](link), it seems logical that we should spend as much time cultivating social relationships as we spend on other healthy pursuits such as exercise and diet.

Like other healthy activities, maintaining relationships requires the investment of resources. It involves the giving of time, energy, knowledge and sometimes money. But to what extent is giving or sharing good for us? Do the benefits of generosity outweigh the costs?

There do seem to be social advantages for [people](link) who behave benevolently towards others. Evolutionary psychologists have described the [competitive altruism hypothesis](link), which posits that helpful group members tend to be perceived as possessing the highest status in the group, and are more likely to be selected as partners with whom to interact and cooperate. So being helpful to others within a group can be seen as a "[costly signal](link)" – a behaviour that consumes resources, but which ultimately signals the person's positive aspects to the other group members. The popularity of such individuals may increase their chances of reproducing and passing on their genes, making altruism an evolutionary advantageous behaviour.

Altruism has also been shown to benefit the giver by increasing their levels of personal well-being. In fact being altruistic [has been linked](link) to higher satisfaction with life and happiness, as well as lower levels of depression. There are also strong positive relationships between altruism

and [physical health](#), including reduced mortality rates in altruistic groups when compared to less altruistic groups.

There are many different reasons for such health benefits. From the perspective of my own research, which is couched in the [social identity perspective](#) of social psychology, it can be argued that it is the group connections that are fostered through the giving and receiving of assistance that benefit our health and well-being. This also applies to helping those that are not part of our immediate group, such as refugees. Such actions [will help to show](#) that we are generous, intelligent and so on to people in our own group.

Identifying with social groups and their members provides us with a sense of purpose in life, as well as the knowledge that we will be likely to receive support from fellow group members during times of stress or crisis. [I have shown](#) how this subjective sense of group identification can be even more important for mental health than the amount of contact that we have with members of the group. This suggests that the costs of being nice are ultimately outweighed by its numerous advantages.

The downsides

The story doesn't end there, however. It does also appear that it is possible to be "too nice". This is clearest in instances where people become overburdened with the need to care for or provide for others. This situation can lead to stress, burnout and poor [mental health](#). It is commonly observed in people who help others for a living, such as [healthcare professionals](#) and [hospice caregivers](#), but it can be seen among those who spend a lot of time helping others in their [personal lives too](#). Striking a balance between helping others and looking after your personal well-being is important, although not always easy.

Helping others is of course important, but if we are coming close to

burning out it may be helpful to focus on people in a social group we identify strongly with. In this context the people requiring help are likely to also receive support from other group members – taking some of the pressure off.

But being nice is also about having a pleasant attitude; not being aggressive, manipulative or vengeful. Here there's mixed evidence. Expressing anger, which is central to vengeful behaviour, has actually been shown to be associated with heart-related health risks in Western cultures, but the opposite trend has been shown in Asian cultures. There is also evidence that both feeling anger and suppressing it is bad for physical health, while anger suppression has been linked to depression and guilt. So the overall message (at least in terms of keeping yourself healthy in the West) is to avoid becoming angry – but to express the anger if you do. And this seems reasonably consistent with being a nice person.

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