

Teens who feel down may benefit from picking others up

August 24 2018, by Hannah L. Schacter



Boosting someone else may deliver a mood boost to you too. Credit: [Mohamed Nohassi/Unsplash](#), [CC BY](#)

Think about the last time you helped someone out. Maybe you sent a supportive text to a stressed-out friend or gave directions to a lost

stranger.

How did it make you feel?

If you said good, happy, or maybe even "warm and fuzzy," you're not alone. Research shows that helping others offers a number of important psychological and health benefits.

In daily life, people report better mood on days that they [assist a stranger](#) or [offer an empathetic ear to a friend](#). Adults who [volunteer](#), [spend money on others](#) and [support their spouses](#) also experience improved well-being and [reduced risk of death](#).

Helping others is beneficial in part because it [promotes social closeness and feelings of personal competence](#).

As [a researcher who studies adolescent development](#), I decided to investigate how all this might play out in teenagers. I'm interested in studying teens' [prosocial behavior](#) – things like helping, comforting and sharing – in the context of their close relationships. Given that adolescence is a time of [heightened emotional intensity](#), do teens reap mood benefits from helping out others in everyday life?

Teens and depression

Looking back on your own high school years, you might recall feeling intensely anxious about looking cool in front of classmates or being liked by your crush. During adolescence, youth become increasingly [preoccupied with the opinions of their peers](#), including their friends and romantic partners. Indeed, adolescence is a time when experiences of social exclusion or rejection can [sting particularly badly](#).

The teenage years are also a high-risk time for developing depressive

symptoms. Almost [1 in every 11](#) adolescents and young adults in the U.S. experience a major depressive episode. And, even youth with depressive symptoms who don't meet criteria for an official diagnosis of [depression](#) are [at risk for adjustment problems](#), such as loneliness and romantic relationship difficulties.

Depressed adolescents, in addition to feeling hopeless and lacking self-esteem, often respond to [social stress](#) with intensified negative emotions. For example, adolescents with major [depressive disorder take peer rejection harder](#) than do their healthy peers.

If depressed adolescents feel especially bad after negative social encounters, might they feel especially good after positive social encounters? Psychologists know that in general adolescents' concerns about social approval can make positive interpersonal interactions – like offering a peer support or assistance – [all the more rewarding](#). I wanted to see if that held even for teens who were feeling down.

Did you help someone today?

In [our recent study](#), [my colleagues and I](#) examined teenagers' prosocial behavior in their everyday interactions with friends and romantic partners. Our goal was to understand whether giving help is particularly mood-enhancing for youth with depressive symptoms.

We recruited 99 late adolescents from the community around us in Los Angeles. Most of them were high school students or recent [high school graduates](#). First we assessed their depressive symptoms in the lab so we could find out how they'd been feeling the prior couple weeks.

Then we asked them to complete 10 consecutive days of short surveys at home. Each of the 10 days, participants told us whether they helped out their friends or romantic partners – things like doing them a favor, or

making them feel important. They also reported their own mood.

On days that teens helped their friends or dating partners, they experienced increased positive mood. Even if their mood wasn't great the day before or if they themselves didn't receive any social support that day, helping someone else was still related to a boost in their spirits.

But does helping help some teens more than others? The positive effects of day-to-day prosocial behavior on mood that we saw were strongest for teens with higher levels of depressive symptoms. So youth with elevated emotional distress reaped the greatest mood benefits from lending their peers a helping hand.

While we often talk about the importance of receiving social support when we're feeling down, these findings highlight the unique value of providing support to others.

Helping others helps yourself

This study provides a glimpse into the potential benefits of help-giving for teens, particularly those experiencing [depressive symptoms](#). Our finding builds upon previous research demonstrating that prosocial behavior is most rewarding for people experiencing [social anxiety](#), [neuroticism](#) and [body dissatisfaction](#).

Although we did not test for underlying mechanisms for why this might be, it's possible that providing help can make individuals feel [appreciated by others](#) or promote [their sense of purpose](#) and [self-esteem](#). For youth with high levels of social-emotional distress, opportunities to strengthen social connections and feel competent within close relationships might be especially important for improving mood.

Many studies linking prosocial behavior to mood, ours included, are

correlational—we cannot conclude that helping friends or romantic others causes more positive mood. Experimental studies that [randomly assign some participants to engage in acts of kindness](#) and others to engage in non-helping social activities will help rule out the possibility that it's actually positive mood that drives subsequent prosocial behavior.

It's also important to keep in mind that very few of our participants were clinically depressed. Research still needs to determine whether prosocial behavior is similarly linked to positive mood among adolescents with a diagnosed depressive disorder. An interesting question is whether some depressed youth experience emotional "burnout" from very frequent help-giving.

Although the word "adolescence" may conjure up images of reckless teens experiencing interpersonal conflict and emotional turmoil, the adolescent years are a time of great social opportunity and growth. Understanding when, how and why teens behave prosocially – and for whom help-giving most promotes well-being – can contribute to our understanding of [adolescent](#) social development.

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