

# Altruism can be trained

October 11 2018

---



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Whether regarding climate change and its consequences, the refugee crisis or the unfair distribution of wealth, when looking for solutions to these global challenges, the decisions of individuals, such as their willingness to cooperate, are just as important as international agreements or national regulations. This is what scientists call "prosocial

behaviour".

Psychologists from the University of Würzburg and the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Leipzig have now published the results of a longitudinal study that investigated the influence of various mental trainings on [prosocial behaviour](#) over several months.

The results: "We were able to demonstrate that human prosociality is malleable and that different aspects of prosociality can be improved systematically through different types of mental [training](#)," Anne Böckler-Raettig explains; she is a junior professor at the Institute of Psychology at the University of Würzburg. According to her, this can be achieved through training that consists of short daily practices, which are easy to implement in everyday life. The scientists published the results of their study in the journal *Scientific Reports*.

"Human prosociality is at the heart of peaceful societies, and it is key to facing global challenges," Böckler-Raettig explains. Prosocial [behaviour](#) is defined as behaviour that is costly to the individual and benefits others at the individual or group level. Research on cooperation and altruism has been the focus of many disciplines ranging from philosophy and psychology to mathematics and economy, evolutionary biology and neuroscience. Yet, "surprisingly little is known about whether and how human altruistic motivations can be trained," the junior professor says. She believes that this is because economic models often consider prosociality as a stable social preference whose malleability scientists have considered irrelevant for a long time.

## **Training with different focuses**

The scientists were now able to prove this assumption wrong. Over the course of nine months, participants were trained in different types of

[meditation](#)-based mental training for this purpose. One training module was about increasing present-moment attention and body awareness—similar to what is taught in mindfulness-based stress reduction classes that are presently popular. A second module focused on socio-affective skills such as compassion, gratitude, and prosocial motivation. The third module was about cognitive flexibility and the ability to understand other people's perspectives.

"We were mainly interested in which mental training would be effective in cultivating altruistically motivated behaviour, that is behaviour which is immediately directed at improving the well-being of another person," Anne Böckler-Raettig details. The study results give a clear answer to this question: Only the second module, the so-called Affect Module, had a direct impact on the participants' motivation to pursue altruistic behaviour. After training units, they were more generous, more willing to help spontaneously and donated higher amounts to welfare organizations, for example.

## **A step toward a caring society**

"Hence, the Affect Module, consisting of three introductory days, weekly meetings with teachers, and about 30 minutes of daily practice over the course of three months, effectively boosted altruistic behaviours regardless of how the exercises were combined with other practices," the psychologist says. No such progress was measurable in the participants after the two other modules.

So the conclusion the scientists draw is clear: Altruistic motivation and behaviour can be altered through simple, short and inexpensive mental practices. "Cultivating these affective and motivational capacities in schools, healthcare settings and workplaces may be an effective step toward meeting the challenges of a globalized world and moving toward global cooperation and a caring society."

**More information:** Anne Böckler et al, Distinct mental trainings differentially affect altruistically motivated, norm motivated, and self-reported prosocial behaviour, *Scientific Reports* (2018). [DOI: 10.1038/s41598-018-31813-8](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-018-31813-8)

Provided by University of Würzburg

Citation: Altruism can be trained (2018, October 11) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-10-altruism.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.