

A simple strategy to improve your mood in 12 minutes

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New research shows walking around and offering kindness to others can lower anxiety and increase happiness. Credit: Christopher Gannon

We all have a remedy – a glass of wine or a piece of chocolate – for lifting our spirits when we're in a bad mood. Rather than focusing on

ways to make ourselves feel better, a team of Iowa State University researchers suggests wishing others well.

"Walking around and offering kindness to others in the world reduces anxiety and increases [happiness](#) and feelings of social connection," said Douglas Gentile, professor of psychology. "It's a simple strategy that doesn't take a lot of time that you can incorporate into your daily activities."

Gentile, Dawn Sweet, senior lecturer in psychology; and Lanmiao He, [graduate student](#) in psychology, tested the benefits of three different techniques intended to reduce anxiety and increase happiness or well-being. They did this by having [college students](#) walk around a building for 12 minutes and practice one of the following strategies:

- Loving-kindness: Looking at the people they see and thinking to themselves, "I wish for this person to be happy." Students were encouraged to really mean it as they were thinking it.
- Interconnectedness: Looking at the people they see and thinking about how they are connected to each other. It was suggested that students think about the hopes and feelings they may share or that they might take a similar class.
- Downward [social comparison](#): Looking at the people they see and thinking about how they may be better off than each of the people they encountered.

The study, published in the *Journal of Happiness Studies*, also included a control group in which students were instructed to look at people and focus on what they see on the outside, such as their clothing, the combination of colors, textures as well as makeup and accessories. All students were surveyed before and after the walk to measure anxiety, happiness, stress, empathy and connectedness.

Love and kindness wins

The researchers compared each technique with the [control group](#) and found those who practiced loving-kindness or wished others well felt happier, more connected, caring and empathetic, as well as less anxious. The interconnectedness group was more empathetic and connected. Downward social [comparison](#) showed no benefit, and was significantly worse than the loving-kindness technique.

Students who compared themselves to others felt less empathetic, caring and connected than students who extended well wishes to others. Previous studies have shown downward social comparison has a buffering effect when we are feeling bad about ourselves. ISU researchers found the opposite.

"At its core, downward social comparison is a competitive strategy," Sweet said. "That's not to say it can't have some benefit, but competitive mindsets have been linked to stress, anxiety and depression."

The researchers also examined how different types of people reacted to each technique. They expected people who were naturally mindful might benefit more from the loving-kindness strategy, or narcissistic people might have a hard time wishing for others to be happy. They were somewhat surprised by the results.

"This simple practice is valuable regardless of your personality type," Lanmiao He said. "Extending loving-kindness to others worked equally well to reduce anxiety, increase happiness, empathy and feelings of social connection."

Social media comparisons

Social media is like a playground for comparisons: he makes more money than I; she has a nicer car. While the study did not look specifically at social media, Gentile says the results demonstrate that comparison is a risky strategy.

"It is almost impossible not to make comparisons on social media," Gentile said. "Our study didn't test this, but we often feel envy, jealousy, anger or disappointment in response to what we see on social media, and those emotions disrupt our sense of well-being."

Comparison works well when we are learning something or making a choice, Gentile said. For example, as children we learn by watching others and comparing their results to ours. However, when it comes to well-being, comparison is not as effective as loving-kindness, which consistently improves happiness.

More information: Douglas A. Gentile et al. Caring for Others Cares for the Self: An Experimental Test of Brief Downward Social Comparison, Loving-Kindness, and Interconnectedness Contemplations, *Journal of Happiness Studies* (2019). [DOI: 10.1007/s10902-019-00100-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-019-00100-2)

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