

Does kindness equal happiness and health?

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Could kindness be a magic elixir that makes us happier and healthier?

Research suggests acts of kindness like donating money, volunteering and mentoring can boost the giver's emotional health, but science also is studying how altruism improves physical health.

Acts of kindness can take many forms, especially amid Random Acts of Kindness Week from Feb. 13-19. It can be as simple as holding a door for someone, to a commitment like donating blood or starting a fundraiser. (The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation has many ideas to get you going.)

The main takeaway is they promote social connection, said Sonja Lyubomirsky, a psychology professor at the University of California, Riverside. That's especially important during the pandemic as people have become more isolated.

"They can strengthen relationships, help you make new friends, give you a more positive, optimistic outlook and enable you to feel good about yourself," said Lyubomirsky.

Even just recalling acts of kindness could promote well-being. Lyubomirsky led a 2019 study published in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* showing that when participants recalled hugging a grandparent or buying lunch for a co-worker, for instance, their well-being improved as much as when they performed the act.

Some research studies link kindness with the release of neurotransmitters and hormones that contribute to mood and well-being. Waguih William IsHak, professor and clinical chief of psychiatry at Cedars-Sinai in Los Angeles, said the hormone oxytocin in particular benefits overall wellness because of its anti-inflammatory, pro-immunity and anti-stress effects.

"Kindness, whether it is experienced through performing random acts of

kindness, loving kindness meditation or other means, has a profound impact on one's well-being," said IsHak.

Researchers also are studying how altruism improves physical health in measurable ways, such as lowering blood pressure or strengthening the immune system. One study showed spending money on others improved the cardiovascular health of at-risk older adults diagnosed with high blood pressure.

Another study looked at gene expression, the process that enables a cell to respond to its changing environment, and examined changes linked to long-term [physical health](#) outcomes. That research concluded that incorporating "small acts of kindness" into a daily routine could positively alter gene regulation.

"Few studies have shown causal mechanisms between prosocial behavior and improvements in biological processes," said Lyubomirsky, one the authors of the 2017 study published in the journal *Psychoneuroendocrinology*. "Our findings point to possible changes in the immune markers that influence disease development or resistance."

Do all acts of kindness benefit givers equally?

Lara Aknin, director of the Helping and Happiness Lab at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada, said emotional rewards are stronger when people give in ways that are socially connected.

Aknin led a review of research examining when and how generous actions are most likely to boost happiness, and when they are not. The analysis, published in 2020 in *Social Issues and Policy Review*, weighed the happiness impact of altruism using three motivation factors—autonomy, competence and relatedness—and concluded that the most rewarding experiences are those you voluntarily choose to

perform (as opposed to being compelled to), those in which you see your efforts make a [positive impact](#), and those that connect you with other people.

"People tend to get more out of [prosocial behavior](#) when they give in a face-to-face manner and can see how their gift helped someone in need," said Aknin, who also is associate professor of psychology.

Her review also suggests how organizations and public policy can make prosocial actions more emotionally rewarding, suggesting that even paying taxes could be more satisfying if payers were given more [positive feedback](#) about the people and initiatives their tax dollars impact.

Researchers also want to measure the durability of the happiness we get from [acts of kindness](#), Aknin said. We feel good right after acting generously and when we recall it, but how long does that last?

"We need large studies to test that," she said. "While we don't know the longevity of a single act, we do know there is a positive feedback loop between generosity and [kindness](#). Giving makes people happier, and happier people are more likely to give."

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