

Virtue helps people rise above despair and resentment

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New research reveals that devotion to selfless values can help people feel more confident and less hostile in stressful circumstances.

In two experiments, participants focused on their own selfless values, with most related to benefiting others. This action caused brain activity and feelings linked to personal [power](#), which made the participants less hostile toward disliked people and worldviews.

"Selfless values can be like life vests that buoy a kind of higher power and resilience, freeing us from worry and defensiveness," said Ian McGregor, professor of personality and [social psychology](#) at the University of Waterloo and the study's lead author. "Focusing on a greater good beyond themselves had the paradoxical effect of making participants' psychologically stronger and more reasonable."

In both experiments the authors first reminded all participants about stressful topics—such as [relationship problems](#) and moral violations—that have typically made participants upset and defensively hostile in past research. They then gave the participants a few minutes to describe how their life goals reflected their highest values. In one of the experiments, 197 participants wore electroencephalographic (EEG) headsets that measured patterns of [brain activity](#) related to power and enthusiasm. In the second experiment, 490 participants rated how determined and enthusiastic they felt.

Focusing on selfless values in their lives heightened the EEG and feeling measures of personal power, which in turn reduced harsh judgments. Importantly, these effects occurred only among participants who also reported being persistently engaged in the pursuit of purpose and meaning in their lives.

"These results help makes sense of why and for whom devotion to selfless values can sustain tenacious resolve, even in seemingly hopeless circumstances," McGregor said.

These results build on previous research by McGregor and collaborators

showing that devotion to virtue predicts wise reasoning and respect for others' perspectives in conflicts. They also complement another line of their research showing that hate between groups can activate the same motivational system to bolster feelings of personal power and meaning in life.

"Together, the present and previous research suggests that devotion to virtue may be an under-appreciated antidote to hostility and hate in the [real world](#). Virtue and hate are alternative levers for activating personal power and meaning in life. If you have one, you feel less need for the other," McGregor said.

The new study appears in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

More information: Ian McGregor et al, Higher power dynamics: How meaning search and self-transcendence inspire approach motivation and magnanimity, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2022.104350](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2022.104350)

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