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Awareness

Small acts of kindness: what they do for those who do them

The meta-analysis by Oliver Curry and colleagues (2018), the studies on spending on others and how to make kindness a habit

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Translated from the Albanian original by the editors.



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In Albanian tradition, hospitality and helping one's neighbour have always been great values. Modern psychology has begun to study something many grandmothers knew: when you do good for someone else, you feel better yourself.

Spending on others

In 2008 the psychologists Elizabeth Dunn, Lara Aknin and Michael Norton gave participants an envelope with 5 or 20 dollars. Some were told to spend it on themselves by the evening, others to spend it on someone else or on charity. In the evening, those who had spent it on others reported more happiness than those who had spent it on themselves. The amount did not matter much; what mattered was who it went to.

The 2018 meta-analysis

In 2018 a group of researchers in Oxford led by Oliver Curry combined the results of 27 experiments in which participants were asked to perform acts of kindness. They found a positive effect on the well-being of those doing the kindness, but a **small to medium** one. The researchers also pointed out that many studies were small and that the effect may be somewhat overestimated.

This is an honest result: kindness is not a magic cure for happiness. But it is a simple, cost-free way of doing good to two people at once.

> *Kindness is the only gift that, when you give it, also leaves something in your own hand.*

Why it might work

Acts of kindness connect us with others, remind us that we have something to give and take us a little away from our own worries. They can also create a virtuous circle: people who receive kindness are more likely to pass it on. But kindness done out of obligation or in expectation of reward seems to have less effect.

In 136 countries

Is this effect just a feature of rich countries? In 2013 Lara Aknin and colleagues used data from Gallup surveys in 136 countries and found that people who had donated money to charity in the past month reported greater life satisfaction, in both rich and poor countries. They also carried out experiments in Canada, Uganda and South Africa, in which participants recalled a time when they had spent money on themselves or on others. Recalling spending on others made them feel better in all three countries.

Even small children

In 2012 Lara Aknin, Kiley Hamlin and Elizabeth Dunn studied children under two years old. The children received some treats and were then asked to give one of them to a puppet. The researchers filmed the children's facial expressions, and raters who did not

know the purpose of the study scored them. The children looked happier when giving treats to others than when receiving them themselves, and especially when giving from their own treats rather than from ones found by chance. The study was small, but it suggests that the pleasure of giving appears very early.

We underestimate the effect

One reason we do not perform more acts of kindness is that we do not realise how much they mean to others. Amit Kumar and Nicholas Epley carried out a series of experiments in which participants performed a small gesture, such as giving someone a cup of hot chocolate in a park. Before giving it, they predicted how good the recipient would feel. In every case, the recipients felt noticeably better than the givers had predicted. This underestimation may stop us from making gestures that would genuinely please other people.

Five acts in one day

Sonja Lyubomirsky and colleagues reported an interesting finding in 2005. Students were told to perform five acts of kindness a week for six weeks. Some had to do all five on a single day, while others spread them across the week. Only the group that did them all on one day reported a noticeable rise in happiness. The authors suggested that spread-out acts might become small and invisible amid the routine. The study was small, but it shows that the way we organise kindness may matter.

Volunteering and health

Among older people, volunteering has also been linked to health. In 2013 Morris Okun, Ellen Yeung and Stephanie Brown combined the results of 14 studies and found that older adults who volunteered had a noticeably lower risk of death during the follow-up period compared with those who did not. The link shrank when initial health and other factors were taken into account, but it did not disappear. Here too, it cannot be said with certainty whether volunteering improves health, or whether healthier people simply volunteer more.

How to make it a habit

1. **Choose one kindness day a week** and do several small acts that day. Some studies suggest this works better than one random act every day.
2. **Start with those close to you:** a call to your grandmother, help for a neighbour, a thank-you message to an old teacher.
3. **Vary the acts**, so they do not become a mechanical routine.

4. **Notice how you feel afterwards**, without turning kindness into a task for your own happiness.

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