

Prosocial Behavior: Random Acts of Kindness

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A prosocial behavior is any action that helps others without any immediate benefit to the helper. There is a variety of different theories for why people engage in these behaviors. One is the empathy-altruism hypothesis which proposes that people help others because of concern for others' wellbeing. Another theory, the negative-state relief theory, holds that people engage in prosocial behavior because it reduces their negative feelings, which may or may not be associated with the emergency. The empathetic joy theory finds that the rewarding feeling of accomplishment achieved by helping is motivation for prosocial behavior. From a more evolutionary standpoint, the competitive altruism, kin selection, and defensive helping theories all look at prosocial behavior as a way to advance one's own genes, perhaps even at the expense of another group.

Over the course of the month, I recorded five instances of random acts of kindness that I performed. Interestingly, I found that they each had slightly different motivating forces despite all being prosocial behaviors. In addition, I responded differently to each situation as did the person I helped. Some of the simplest acts had the greatest response and gave me the greatest sense of satisfaction. Because of the complexity of the human experience, I had some very complex feelings associated with each action.

Act 1

The first random act of kindness I recorded was when I offered to pay for my mom's coffee one afternoon. She was going to buy the coffee anyway and it was not expensive by any means, so I just decided to pay for it for her. My motivations for this action were that she had had a hard day so I thought a simple gesture might cheer her up I would get a drink out of it as

well. This motivation aligns most with the empathy-altruism theory of prosocial behavior; I was concerned for my mom's happiness, so I just wanted to make her day better.

My mom's reaction to this gesture was greater than I would have imagined. When I offered to pay, she seemed so grateful. She told me that she almost cried in response to my offer. She even told me she would pay anyway (although I still paid), but the fact that I thought of her was enough for her to have a strong reaction. Though it was a small act, it felt good to have made her happy.

Act 2

My second random act of kindness was when I helped an older woman pick up a box of tissues that had fallen out of her cart at the store. For a second I just looked at the box while I was trying to assess the situation, but ultimately decided to help her because she looked physically impaired and obviously did not want to have to bend over to pick it up. I had also made eye contact with her prior to helping, so after making that connection I could not just leave her to do that for herself. I would have felt terrible had I not helped her.

The woman was very thankful when I picked up that box for her. I felt happy and accomplished afterwards, providing evidence for the empathetic joy view of prosocial behavior. The woman began talking to my mom and I afterwards; it was like that small gesture created a connection between us.

Act 3

The third random act of kindness I performed was picking up donuts and coffee for my family after I was out for an appointment. My motivation for this act was similar to the first; I would get a donut and a drink out of the arrangement, but it would also give my family a good

start to their days. I also could not back out of it because I had already asked everyone what they wanted the night before.

This act had the most complex reaction. My family was very appreciative of it, although I never got direct appreciation from my dad because he was working at the time. I did not have a positive reaction to this act of kindness. I felt good going into it because I usually feel helpful and accomplished after things like this, but my drink and my donut were wrong, so that dampened my happiness. I expect that I would have had a better reaction had those things not been wrong, but this act of kindness caused a negative reaction from me.

Act 4

The fourth act of kindness was that I helped my mom with volunteering at our church's food pantry even though I had other things I could be doing. I usually help her with bagging groceries, but I almost never help with grocery shopping since I already put about two hours into it every week. This particular day, I had a lot of schoolwork to do, but she persuaded me to help her with grocery shopping. My primary motivation for this act was to eliminate that negative feeling of guilt I would have had if I did not help her.

Afterwards, she was so thankful for my help. I cut down at least an hour of time spent shopping and putting groceries away, and I kept her company while we were out. I felt better not having that guilt weighing me down, but I was also stressed about my schoolwork. There were benefits and consequences to this act.

Act 5

The fifth and final act of kindness I recorded consisted of me making my parents' oatmeal for the next morning. We always help each other out with this, but it is usually a coordinated effort. While my mom was doing taxes and my dad was working, I decided to just

make the oatmeal for all of us and put it in the refrigerator to make their mornings easier. My motivation was mostly for them to be happy in the morning when they could save a few minutes by not having to make their oatmeal.

I did not witness a reaction from either of them in the morning. I never got a reaction from this act of kindness. I can only imagine that they were delighted to see their oatmeal ready, although I will never know. I felt quite neutral after this, perhaps because I did not get any reaction from my parents. I also just see acts like this as part of my duty for being a part of the family.

Good Acts Requirement

A requirement to do one good act a day would definitely change life. However, it would take a lot of the motivation out of prosocial behaviors. Personally, I have more satisfaction from an action when it comes from some sort of intrinsic motivation. If one good act a day was required, it would take the accomplishment out of these kind actions and make them less satisfactory; people would not want to be kind anymore because it would be more of a chore.