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**A Little Good Goes Farther Than You Think**

*People are touched by small kindnesses and led to greater generosity, new research shows.*

**Based on the research of Amit Kumar**



Anyone who has given a friend a ride, baked cookies for a sick family member, or even bought a stranger a cup of coffee knows acts of kindness can enhance happiness.

But such random acts of kindness are still somewhat rare. Texas McCombs Assistant Professor of Marketing [Amit Kumar](https://www.mccombs.utexas.edu/faculty-and-research/faculty-directory/amit-kumar/) set out to discover why people don’t engage in prosocial acts — such as helping, sharing, or donating — more often.

In a new study, Kumar, along with Nicholas Epley of the University of Chicago, found that people often underestimate how good these actions make recipients feel. Givers tend to focus on the object they’re providing or action they’re performing, while receivers instead concentrate on the feelings of warmth the act of kindness has conjured up. Givers’ “miscalibrated expectations” — that receivers are solely concerned with the gift itself — can function as a barrier to performing more prosocial behaviors.

“Performers don’t realize how much of an impact they’re having on people through their kindness, and that can stand in the way of these behaviors.” — Amit Kumar

**Hot Chocolate for Strangers**

To quantify these attitudes and behaviors, the researchers conducted a series of experiments, both in the field in Chicago and in the laboratory.

In one experiment, they asked MBA students to perform two random acts of kindness of their choosing over a two-day period without expecting anything in return, ideally one to a stranger and one to a friend. Acts included paying for someone’s lunch at a café or going above and beyond to help a colleague with a task.

Students then answered a questionnaire. They noted how big they thought the act was, and they estimated their mood and the recipient’s mood after the act on a scale of -5 (much more negative than normal) to 5 (much more positive than normal). The researchers emailed recipients asking them to respond to the same scale. Performers thought recipients were at a 2.32 on average on the mood scale immediately after the act, while recipients themselves reported an average of 3.55.

“Both performers and recipients were in better moods after,” Kumar says. “But it was clear that performers underestimated the value of their actions.”

In another experiment, the researchers recruited 84 participants in Chicago’s Maggie Daley Park. Participants could choose whether to give away to a stranger a cup of hot chocolate from the park’s food kiosk or keep it for themselves. Seventy-five agreed to give it away.

A research assistant delivered the hot chocolate to each stranger and told them the study participant had chosen to give them their drink. Recipients reported their mood, and performers indicated how they thought recipients felt after getting the drink.

Again, performers underestimated the significance of their act. Performers expected recipients’ mood at an average of 2.7, while recipients reported an average of 3.5. “People aren’t way off base,” Kumar says.

“They get that being kind to people makes them feel good. What we don’t get is how good it really makes others feel.” — Amit Kumar

**Generosity Can Be Contagious**

To discover the potential reason for the discrepancy, the researchers performed a similar experiment in the same park with cupcakes. They recruited 200 participants and divided them into two groups. In the control group, 50 participants received a cupcake for participating. They rated their mood, and the other 50 people rated how they thought the receivers felt after getting a cupcake.

For the second group of 100, 50 people were told they could give away their cupcake to strangers. They rated their own mood and the expected mood of the cupcake recipients. The researchers found that participants rated cupcake recipients’ happiness at about the same level whether they got their cupcake through an act of random kindness or from the researchers. What’s more, recipients who received a cupcake through an act of kindness were happier than control group recipients.

“Performers are not fully taking into account that their warm acts provide value from the act itself,” Kumar says. “The fact that you’re being nice to others adds a lot of value beyond whatever the thing is.”

Finally, in a lab experiment, the researchers added a component to assess the consequences of kindness. Participants first either received a gift from the lab store or were gifted one by another participant, then played a game. All participants who received an item were told to divide $100 between themselves and an unknown study recipient.

The researchers found that recipients who received their lab gift through another participant’s random act of kindness were more generous to strangers during the game. They divvyed up the $100 more equally, giving away $48.02 on average versus $41.20.

“It turns out generosity can actually be contagious,” Kumar says.

“Receivers of a prosocial act can pay it forward. Kindness can actually spread.” — Amit Kumar

The researchers’ findings offer practical implications and advice for people going about their everyday lives. When people realize their small actions have a large impact, they can choose to be nicer and carry out more acts of random kindness, enhancing both their well-being and that of others.

“Positive interpersonal contact is a powerful source of happiness,” Kumar says. “It will make you feel better and someone else feel better, even better than you think they’ll feel. A little good doesn’t just go a long way — it goes an unexpectedly long way.”

“[A Little Good Goes An Unexpectedly Long Way: Underestimating the Positive Impact of Kindness on Recipients](https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2022-85307-001)”*is forthcoming, online in advance* *in*the Journal of Experimental Psychology: General.

*Story by Deborah Lynn Blumberg*