**The Science of Positive Thinking: How Positive Thoughts Build Your Skills, Boost Your Health, and Improve Your Work**

**Huffington Post, Healthy Living Section**

**By James Clear**

**July 10, 2013**

Positive thinking sounds useful on the surface. (Most of us would prefer to be positive rather than negative.) But "positive thinking" is also a soft and fluffy term that is easy to dismiss. In the real world, it rarely carries the same weight as words like "work ethic" or "persistence."

But those views may be changing.

Research is beginning to reveal that positive thinking is about much more than just being happy or displaying an upbeat attitude. Positive thoughts can actually create real value in your life and help you build skills that last much longer than a smile.

The impact of positive thinking on your work, your health, and your life is being studied by people who are much smarter than me. One of these people is Barbara Fredrickson.

Fredrickson is a positive psychology researcher at the University of North Carolina, and she [published a landmark paper](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3156028/) that provides surprising insights about positive thinking and its impact on your skills. Her work is among the most referenced and cited in her field, and it is surprisingly useful in everyday life.

Let's talk about Fredrickson's discovery and what it means for you...

**What Negative Thoughts Do to Your Brain**

Play along with me for a moment.

Let's say that you're walking through the forest and suddenly a tiger steps onto the path ahead of you. When this happens, your brain registers a negative emotion -- in this case, fear.

Researchers have long known that negative emotions program your brain to do a specific action. When that tiger crosses your path, for example, you run. The rest of the world doesn't matter. You are focused entirely on the tiger, the fear it creates, and how you can get away from it.

In other words, negative emotions narrow your mind and focus your thoughts. At that same moment, you might have the option to climb a tree, pick up a leaf, or grab a stick -- but your brain ignores all of those options because they seem irrelevant when a tiger is standing in front of you.

This is a useful instinct if you're trying to save life and limb, but in our modern society we don't have to worry about stumbling across tigers in the wilderness. The problem is that your brain is still programmed to respond to negative emotions in the same way -- by shutting off the outside world and limiting the options you see around you.

For example, when you're in a fight with someone, your anger and emotion might consume you to the point where you can't think about anything else. Or, when you are stressed out about everything you have to get done today, you may find it hard to actual start anything because you're paralyzed by how long your to-do list has become. Or, if you feel bad about not exercising or not eating healthy, all you think about is how little willpower you have, how you're lazy, and how you don't have any motivation.

In each case, your brain closes off from the outside world and focuses on the negative emotions of fear, anger, and stress -- just like it did with the tiger. Negative emotions prevent your brain from seeing the other options and choices that surround you. It's your survival instinct.

Now, let's compare this to what positive emotions do to your brain. This is where Barbara Fredrickson returns to the story.

**What Positive Thoughts Do to Your Brain**

Fredrickson tested the impact of positive emotions on the brain by setting up a little experiment. During this experiment, she divided her research subjects into five groups and showed each group different film clips.

The first two groups were shown clips that created positive emotions. Group 1 saw images that created feelings of joy. Group 2 saw images that created feelings of contentment.

Group 3 was the control group. They saw images that were neutral and produced no significant emotion.

The last two groups were shown clips that created negative emotions. Group 4 saw images that created feelings of fear. Group 5 saw images that created feelings of anger.

Afterward, each participant was asked to imagine themselves in a situation where similar feelings would arise and to write down what they would do. Each participant was handed a piece of paper with 20 blank lines that started with the phrase, "I would like to..."

Participants who saw images of fear and anger wrote down the fewest responses. Meanwhile, the participants who saw images of joy and contentment, wrote down a significantly higher number of actions that they would take, even when compared to the neutral group.

In other words, when you are experiencing positive emotions like joy, contentment, and love, you will see more possibilities in your life. These findings were among the first that suggested positive emotions broaden your sense of possibility and open your mind up to more options.

But that was just the beginning. The really interesting impact of positive thinking happens later...

**How Positive Thinking Builds Your Skill Set**

The benefits of positive emotions don't stop after a few minutes of good feelings subside. In fact, the biggest benefit that positive emotions provide is an enhanced ability to build skills and develop resources for use later in life.

Let's consider a real-world example.

A child who runs around outside, swinging on branches and playing with friends, develops the ability to move athletically (physical skills), the ability to play with others and communicate with a team (social skills), and the ability to explore and examine the world around them (creative skills). In this way, the positive emotions of play and joy prompt the child to build skills that are useful and valuable in everyday life.

These skills last much longer than the emotions that initiated them. Years later, that foundation of athletic movement might develop into a scholarship as a college athlete or the communication skills may blossom into a job offer as a business manager. The happiness that promoted the exploration and creation of new skills has long since ended, but the skills themselves live on.

Fredrickson refers to this as the ["broaden and build" theory](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1693418/) because positive emotions broaden your sense of possibilities and open your mind, which in turn allows you to build new skills and resources that can provide value in other areas of your life.

As we discussed earlier, negative emotions do the opposite. Why? Because building skills for future use is irrelevant when there is immediate threat or danger (like the tiger on the path).

All of this research begs the most important question of all: If positive thinking is so useful for developing valuable skills and appreciating the big picture of life, how do you actually get yourself to be positive?

**How to Increase Positive Thinking in Your Life**

What you can do to increase positive emotions and take advantage of the "broaden and build" theory in your life?

Well, anything that sparks feelings of joy, contentment, and love will do the trick. You probably know what things work well for you. Maybe it's playing the guitar. Maybe it's spending time with a certain person. Maybe it's carving tiny wooden lawn gnomes.

That said, here are three ideas for you to consider...

**1. Meditation** -- [Recent research by Fredrickson](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3156028/) and her colleagues has revealed that people who meditate daily display more positive emotions that those who do not. As expected, people who meditated also built valuable long-term skills. For example, three months after the experiment was over, the people who meditated daily continued to display increased mindfulness, purpose in life, social support, and decreased illness symptoms.

**2. Writing** -- This study, published in the Journal of Research in Personality, [examined a group of 90 undergraduate students](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0092656603000588) who were split into two groups. The first group wrote about an intensely positive experience each day for three consecutive days. The second group wrote about a control topic.

Three months later, the students who wrote about positive experiences had better mood levels, fewer visits to the health center, and experienced fewer illnesses. (This blew me away. Better health after just three days of writing about positive things!)

**3. Play** -- Schedule time to play into your life. We schedule meetings, conference calls, weekly events, and other responsibilities into our daily calendars... why not schedule time to play?

When was the last time you blocked out an hour on your calendar just to explore and experiment? When was the last time you intentionally carved out time to have fun? You can't tell me that being happy is less important than your Wednesday meeting, and yet, we act like it is because we never give it a time and space to live on our calendars.

Give yourself permission to smile and enjoy the benefits of positive emotion. Schedule time for play and adventure so that you can experience contentment and joy, and explore and build new skills.

**Happiness vs. Success (Which Comes First?)**

There's no doubt that happiness is the result of achievement. Winning a championship, landing a better job, finding someone you love -- these things will bring joy and contentment to your life. But so often, we wrongly assume that this means happiness always follows success.

How often have you thought, "If I just get \_\_\_, then I'll be set."

Or, "Once I achieve \_\_\_, I'll be satisfied."

I know I'm guilty of putting off happiness until I achieve some arbitrary goal. But as Fredrickson's "broaden and build" theory proves, happiness is essential to building the skills that allow for success.

In other words, happiness is both the precursor to success and the result of it.

In fact, researchers have often noticed a compounding effect or an "upward spiral" that occurs with happy people. They are happy, so they develop new skills, those skills lead to new success, which results in more happiness, and the process repeats itself.

**Where to Go From Here**

Positive thinking isn't just a soft and fluffy feel-good term. Yes, it's great to simply "be happy," but those moments of happiness are also critical for opening your mind to explore and build the skills that become so valuable in other areas of your life.

Finding ways to build happiness and positive emotions into your life -- whether it is through meditation, writing, playing a pickup basketball game, or anything else -- provides more than just a momentary decrease in stress and a few smiles.

Periods of positive emotion and unhindered exploration are when you see the possibilities for how your past experiences fit into your future life, when you begin to develop skills that blossom into useful talents later on, and when you spark the urge for further exploration and adventure.

To put it simply: Seek joy, play often, and pursue adventure. Your brain will do the rest.

## Montgomery Ward/Park Building

**The Oregon Encyclopedia, a project of the Oregon Historical Society**



Montgomery Ward (Park) Building, Aug. 11, 1920

The Montgomery Ward building in northwest [Portland](http://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/portland/) was a hallmark of modern industrial design when it opened on January 1, 1921. Built with fireproof, steel-reinforced concrete to be light and airy, the nine-story building housed a branch of Montgomery Ward & Company until 1982. The building, at 2701 Northwest Vaughn Street, is on the grounds of the 1905 [Lewis and Clark Exposition](http://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/lewis_clark_exposition/). Company engineer W.H. McCaully created the design for the building, which was used in six other company buildings around the nation.

In 1925, the company placed a large neon “Montgomery Ward” sign on the roof. Several years later, in 1936, an addition transformed the building from an L-shape to a U-shape, providing showroom space for the company’s retail sales.

When Montgomery Ward closed its northwest Portland branch in 1982, the company sold the building to H. Naito Properties. Naito hired SERA Architects and spent $36 million to renovate the building for office use, adding a nine-story glass atrium inside the U. The neon sign on the roof was changed to read “Montgomery Park.”

The building has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1985.

# Mindfulness Training Helps Teens Cope with Stress and Anxiety

**Washington Post**

**By Gosia Wozniacka**

**December 15, 2014**

As the morning school bell rings and students rush through crowded corridors, teenagers in a classroom settle onto mats and meditation pillows. They fall silent after the teacher taps a Tibetan “singing bowl.”

“Allow yourself to settle into the experience of being here, in this moment,” teacher Caverly Morgan tells two dozen students at Wilson High School in Portland, Ore.

The students are enrolled in a for-credit, year-long mindfulness class meant to ease youth anxiety and depression and to prevent violence. For 90 minutes three days a week, they practice a mix of yoga, sitting and walking meditation, visualization techniques, deep breathing, journaling and nonjudgmental listening.

The idea behind mindfulness is that focusing on the present moment helps a person deal better with stress, difficult emotions and negative thoughts.

Mindfulness, yoga and meditation have gained popularity among Americans in recent decades, buoyed by studies showing their benefits to emotional, mental and physical health. The centuries-old practices have roots in Buddhism and Hinduism, but Western culture has secularized them to focus on physical postures, breathing and relaxation techniques.

The year-long course is one of a growing number of programs incorporating mindfulness, yoga and meditation into school curriculums to bring socio-emotional benefits to students.

Such practices are now offered to employees by corporations such as Google, Target and General Mills. Prison inmates, hospital patients and the U.S. Marines are using them to combat stress and illness, and to increase focus and well-being. And now schools all over the country are introducing the practices to help stressed kids.

“High school is the hardest period of time for kids,” Bruce Chatard, Wilson’s principal, said. “You’ve got emotional changes, hormonal changes, all the social pressures. It’s also the onset of mental illness for some kids, depression hits, and there’s the pressure of college and sports. All these things kids do is overwhelming without having a strategy to deal with it.”

Some people have greeted the move with less than enthusiasm.

Last year, an elementary school in Ohio ended its mindfulness program after parents complained it was too closely linked to Eastern religion, and a conservative Christian law firm sued on behalf of a couple in Encinitas, Calif., arguing — unsuccessfully — that their school district’s yoga classes indoctrinate children.

But many school districts are reporting success.

In Richmond, Calif., where a teacher started a program called the Mindful Life Project, schools have reported drops in detentions and disciplinary referrals among low-income, at-risk youth.

The school district in South Burlington, Vt., implemented a mindfulness course as part of a health and wellness program, and now administrators there have written a manual on incorporating mindfulness into K-12 curriculums.

Portland is known for its progressivism, so it should be no surprise that the idea of teaching mindfulness is being embraced there. Students at Wilson say the class has been a boon for them.

“Sometimes I have trouble breathing; I have panic attacks. This class helps me bring more attention to my breath and overcome that,” junior Cassia McIntyre said. “I’m less stressed-out and able to better cope with stress.”

The class is the brainchild of Morgan, who trained at a Zen Buddhist monastery for eight years and opened a meditation center in Sacramento. After moving to Portland two years ago, Morgan teamed up with Allyson Copacino, who teaches yoga to children. The two started an after-school program at Wilson. After hundreds of students signed up, principal Chatard took note. The school was dealing with a student’s suicide, and few resources were available to address students’ emotional and mental health.

Pediatric psychologists at Oregon Health & Science University are partnering with the mindfulness program to study its impact on students. A similar year-long program is offered at nearby Rosemary Anderson High School, which serves students who were expelled or dropped out, are homeless or who are single parents.

Unlike at Wilson, mindfulness at Rosemary is mandatory for about 70 students. Some were initially skeptical and complained about the course, principal Erica Stavis said.

But on midterm reviews, students reported that the class had helped them better recognize their feelings, deal with anger and distance themselves from destructive thoughts during difficult family situations.

“This program filled a gap,” Stavis said. “It helps students build capacity to problem-solve.”

# The Teen Brain: Still Under Construction

# National Institute of Health

## Introduction

One of the ways that scientists have searched for the causes of mental illness is by studying the development of the brain from birth to adulthood. Powerful new technologies have enabled them to track the growth of the brain and to investigate the connections between brain function, development, and behavior.

The research has turned up some surprises, among them the discovery of striking changes taking place during the teen years. These findings have altered long-held assumptions about the timing of brain maturation. In key ways, the brain doesn’t look like that of an adult until the early 20s.

An understanding of how the brain of an adolescent is changing may help explain a puzzling contradiction of adolescence: young people at this age are close to a lifelong peak of physical health, strength, and mental capacity, and yet, for some, this can be a hazardous age. Mortality rates jump between early and late adolescence. Rates of death by injury between ages 15 to 19 are about six times that of the rate between ages 10 and 14. Crime rates are highest among young males and rates of alcohol abuse are high relative to other ages. Even though most adolescents come through this transitional age well, it’s important to understand the risk factors for behavior that can have serious consequences. Genes, childhood experience, and the environment in which a young person reaches adolescence all shape behavior. Adding to this complex picture, research is revealing how all these factors act in the context of a brain that is changing, with its own impact on behavior.

The more we learn, the better we may be able to understand the abilities and vulnerabilities of teens, and the significance of this stage for life-long mental health.

The fact that so much change is taking place beneath the surface may be something for parents to keep in mind during the ups and downs of adolescence.

## The "Visible" Brain

A clue to the degree of change taking place in the teen brain came from studies in which scientists did brain scans of children as they grew from early childhood through age 20. The scans revealed unexpectedly late changes in the volume of gray matter, which forms the thin, folding outer layer or cortex of the brain. The cortex is where the processes of thought and memory are based. Over the course of childhood, the volume of gray matter in the cortex increases and then declines. A decline in volume is normal at this age and is in fact a necessary part of maturation.

The assumption for many years had been that the volume of gray matter was highest in very early childhood, and gradually fell as a child grew. The more recent scans, however, revealed that the high point of the volume of gray matter occurs during early adolescence.

While the details behind the changes in volume on scans are not completely clear, the results push the timeline of brain maturation into adolescence and young adulthood. In terms of the volume of gray matter seen in brain images, the brain does not begin to resemble that of an adult until the early 20s.

The scans also suggest that different parts of the cortex mature at different rates. Areas involved in more basic functions mature first: those involved, for example, in the processing of information from the senses, and in controlling movement. The parts of the brain responsible for more "top-down" control, controlling impulses, and planning ahead—the hallmarks of adult behavior—are among the last to mature.

## What's Gray Matter?

The details of what is behind the increase and decline in gray matter are still not completely clear. Gray matter is made up of the cell bodies of neurons, the nerve fibers that project from them, and support cells. One of the features of the brain's growth in early life is that there is an early blooming of synapses—the connections between brain cells or neurons—followed by pruning as the brain matures. Synapses are the relays over which neurons communicate with each other and are the basis of the working circuitry of the brain. Already more numerous than an adult's at birth, synapses multiply rapidly in the first months of life. A 2-year-old has about half again as many synapses as an adult. (For an idea of the complexity of the brain: a cube of brain matter, 1 millimeter on each side, can contain between 35 and 70 million neurons and an estimated 500 billion synapses.)

Scientists believe that the loss of synapses as a child matures is part of the process by which the brain becomes more efficient. Although genes play a role in the decline in synapses, animal research has shown that experience also shapes the decline. Synapses "exercised" by experience survive and are strengthened, while others are pruned away. Scientists are working to determine to what extent the changes in gray matter on brain scans during the teen years reflect growth and pruning of synapses.

## A Spectrum of Change

Research using many different approaches is showing that more than gray matter is changing:

* Connections between different parts of the brain increase throughout childhood and well into adulthood. As the brain develops, the fibers connecting nerve cells are wrapped in a protein that greatly increases the speed with which they can transmit impulses from cell to cell. The resulting increase in connectivity—a little like providing a growing city with a fast, integrated communication system—shapes how well different parts of the brain work in tandem. Research is finding that the extent of connectivity is related to growth in intellectual capacities such as memory and reading ability.
* Several lines of evidence suggest that the brain circuitry involved in emotional responses is changing during the teen years. Functional brain imaging studies, for example, suggest that the responses of teens to emotionally loaded images and situations are heightened relative to younger children and adults. The brain changes underlying these patterns involve brain centers and signaling molecules that are part of the reward system with which the brain motivates behavior. These age-related changes shape how much different parts of the brain are activated in response to experience, and in terms of behavior, the urgency and intensity of emotional reactions.
* Enormous hormonal changes take place during adolescence. Reproductive hormones shape not only sex-related growth and behavior, but overall social behavior. Hormone systems involved in the brain's response to stress are also changing during the teens. As with reproductive hormones, stress hormones can have complex effects on the brain, and as a result, behavior.
* In terms of sheer intellectual power, the brain of an adolescent is a match for an adult's. The capacity of a person to learn will never be greater than during adolescence. At the same time, behavioral tests, sometimes combined with functional brain imaging, suggest differences in how adolescents and adults carry out mental tasks. Adolescents and adults seem to engage different parts of the brain to different extents during tests requiring calculation and impulse control, or in reaction to emotional content.
* Research suggests that adolescence brings with it brain-based changes in the regulation of sleep that may contribute to teens' tendency to stay up late at night. Along with the obvious effects of sleep deprivation, such as fatigue and difficulty maintaining attention, inadequate sleep is a powerful contributor to irritability and depression. Studies of children and adolescents have found that sleep deprivation can increase impulsive behavior; some researchers report finding that it is a factor in delinquency. Adequate sleep is central to physical and emotional health.

## The Changing Brain and Behavior in Teens

One interpretation of all these findings is that in teens, the parts of the brain involved in emotional responses are fully online, or even more active than in adults, while the parts of the brain involved in keeping emotional, impulsive responses in check are still reaching maturity. Such a changing balance might provide clues to a youthful appetite for novelty, and a tendency to act on impulse—without regard for risk.

While much is being learned about the teen brain, it is not yet possible to know to what extent a particular behavior or ability is the result of a feature of brain structure—or a change in brain structure. Changes in the brain take place in the context of many other factors, among them, inborn traits, personal history, family, friends, community, and culture.

## The Adolescent and Adult Brain

It is not surprising that the behavior of adolescents would be a study in change, since the brain itself is changing in such striking ways. Scientists emphasize that the fact that the teen brain is in transition doesn't mean it is somehow not up to par. It is different from both a child's and an adult's in ways that may equip youth to make the transition from dependence to independence. The capacity for learning at this age, an expanding social life, and a taste for exploration and limit testing may all, to some extent, be reflections of age-related biology.

## Eight Weeks to a Better Brain: Meditation Study Shows Changes Associated with Awareness, Stress

**Harvard Gazette**

**By Sue McGreevey**

**January 21, 2011**

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

Participating in an eight-week mindfulness meditation program appears to make measurable changes in brain regions associated with memory, sense of self, empathy, and stress. In a study that will appear in the Jan. 30 issue of [Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging](http://www.elsevier.com/wps/find/journaldescription.cws_home/522789/description#description), a team led by Harvard-affiliated researchers at [Massachusetts General Hospital](http://www.massgeneral.org/) (MGH) reported the results of their study, the first to document meditation-produced changes over time in the brain’s gray matter.

“Although the practice of meditation is associated with a sense of peacefulness and physical relaxation, practitioners have long claimed that meditation also provides cognitive and psychological benefits that persist throughout the day,” says study senior author [Sara Lazar](http://connects.catalyst.harvard.edu/profiles/profile/person/12961) of the MGH [Psychiatric Neuroimaging Research Program](http://www2.massgeneral.org/allpsych/psychneuro/psychneuroimaging.asp) and a [Harvard Medical School](http://hms.harvard.edu/hms/home.asp) instructor in psychology. “This study demonstrates that changes in brain structure may underlie some of these reported improvements and that people are not just feeling better because they are spending time relaxing.”

Previous studies from Lazar’s group and others found structural differences between the brains of experienced meditation practitioners and individuals with no history of meditation, observing thickening of the cerebral cortex in areas associated with attention and emotional integration. But those investigations could not document that those differences were actually produced by meditation.

For the current study, magnetic resonance (MR) images were taken of the brain structure of 16 study participants two weeks before and after they took part in the eight-week [Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Program](http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/stress/index.aspx) at the [University of Massachusetts Center for Mindfulness](http://www.umassmed.edu/content.aspx?id=41252). In addition to weekly meetings that included practice of mindfulness meditation — which focuses on nonjudgmental awareness of sensations, feelings, and state of mind — participants received audio recordings for guided meditation practice and were asked to keep track of how much time they practiced each day. A set of MR brain images was also taken of a control group of nonmeditators over a similar time interval.

Meditation group participants reported spending an average of 27 minutes each day practicing mindfulness exercises, and their responses to a mindfulness questionnaire indicated significant improvements compared with pre-participation responses. The analysis of MR images, which focused on areas where meditation-associated differences were seen in earlier studies, found increased gray-matter density in the hippocampus, known to be important for learning and memory, and in structures associated with self-awareness, compassion, and introspection.

Participant-reported reductions in stress also were correlated with decreased gray-matter density in the amygdala, which is known to play an important role in anxiety and stress. Although no change was seen in a self-awareness-associated structure called the insula, which had been identified in earlier studies, the authors suggest that longer-term meditation practice might be needed to produce changes in that area. None of these changes were seen in the control group, indicating that they had not resulted merely from the passage of time.

“It is fascinating to see the brain’s plasticity and that, by practicing meditation, we can play an active role in changing the brain and can increase our well-being and quality of life,” says [Britta Hölzel](http://www.nmr.mgh.harvard.edu/%7Ebritta/), first author of the paper and a research fellow at MGH and [Giessen University](http://www.uni-giessen.de/cms/target-groups/welcome/view%3fset_language=en) in Germany. “Other studies in different patient populations have shown that meditation can make significant improvements in a variety of symptoms, and we are now investigating the underlying mechanisms in the brain that facilitate this change.”

### 5 Ways Giving Is Good for You

**Greater Good Website**

**By Jason Marsh and Jill Suttie**

**December 13, 2010**

Holiday shopping can be terrifying, yes. But research suggests it’s worth it: New studies attest to the benefits of giving—not just for the recipients but for the givers’ health and happiness, and for the strength of entire communities.

Of course, you don’t have to shop to reap the benefits of giving. Research suggests the same benefits come from donating to charities or volunteering your time, like at a soup kitchen or a homeless shelter. Here are some of the ways that giving is good for you and your community.

**1. Giving makes us feel happy.** A 2008 study by Harvard Business School professor Michael Norton and colleagues found that giving money to someone else lifted participants’ happiness more that spending it on themselves (despite participants’ prediction that spending on themselves would make them happier). Happiness expert Sonja Lyubomirsky, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside, saw similar results when she asked people to perform five acts of kindness each week for six weeks.

These good feelings are reflected in our biology. In a 2006 study, Jorge Moll and colleagues at the National Institutes of Health found that when people give to charities, it activates regions of the brain associated with pleasure, social connection, and trust, creating a “warm glow” effect. Scientists also believe that altruistic behavior releases endorphins in the brain, producing the positive feeling known as the “helper’s high.”

**2. Giving is good for our health.** A wide range of research has linked different forms of generosity to better health, even among the sick and elderly. In his book *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*, Stephen Post, a professor of preventative medicine at Stony Brook University, reports that giving to others has been shown to increase health benefits in people with chronic illness, including HIV and multiple sclerosis.

A 1999 study led by Doug Oman of the University of California, Berkeley, found that elderly people who volunteered for two or more organizations were 44 percent less likely to die over a five-year period than were non-volunteers, even after controlling for their age, exercise habits, general health, and negative health habits like smoking. Stephanie Brown of the University of Michigan saw similar results in a 2003 study on elderly couples. She and her colleagues found that those individuals who provided practical help to friends, relatives, or neighbors, or gave emotional support to their spouses, had a lower risk of dying over a five-year period than those who didn’t. Interestingly, receiving help wasn’t linked to a reduced death risk.

Researchers suggest that one reason giving may improve physical health and longevity is that it helps decrease stress, which is associated with a variety of health problems. In a 2006 study by Rachel Piferi of Johns Hopkins University and Kathleen Lawler of the University of Tennessee, people who provided social support to others had lower blood pressure than participants who didn’t, suggesting a direct physiological benefit to those who give of themselves.

**3. Giving promotes cooperation and social connection.** When you give, you’re more likely to get back: Several studies, including work by sociologists Brent Simpson and Robb Willer, have suggested that when you give to others, your generosity is likely to be rewarded by others down the line—sometimes by the person you gave to, sometimes by someone else.

These exchanges promote a sense of trust and cooperation that strengthens our ties to others—and research has shown that having positive social interactions is central to good mental and physical health. As researcher John Cacioppo writes in his book *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*, “The more extensive the reciprocal altruism born of social connection . . . the greater the advance toward health, wealth, and happiness.”

What’s more, when we give to others, we don’t only make them feel closer to us; we also feel closer to them. “Being kind and generous leads you to perceive others more positively and more charitably,” writes Lyubomirsky in her book *The How of Happiness*, and this “fosters a heightened sense of interdependence and cooperation in your social community.”

**4. Giving evokes gratitude.** Whether you’re on the giving or receiving end of a gift, that gift can elicit feelings of gratitude—it can be a way of expressing gratitude or instilling gratitude in the recipient. And research has found that gratitude is integral to happiness, health, and social bonds.

Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough, co-directors of the Research Project on Gratitude and Thankfulness, found that teaching college students to “count their blessings” and cultivate gratitude caused them to exercise more, be more optimistic, and feel better about their lives overall. A recent study led by Nathaniel Lambert at Florida State University found that expressing gratitude to a close friend or romantic partner strengthens our sense of connection to that person.

Barbara Fredrickson, a pioneering happiness researcher, suggests that cultivating gratitude in everyday life is one of the keys to increasing personal happiness. “When you express your gratitude in words or actions, you not only boost your own positivity but [other people’s] as well,” she writes in her book *Positivity*. “And in the process you reinforce their kindness and strengthen your bond to one another.”

**5. Giving is contagious.** When we give, we don’t only help the immediate recipient of our gift. We also spur a ripple effect of generosity through our community.

A study by James Fowler of the University of California, San Diego, and Nicholas Christakis of Harvard, published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, shows that when one person behaves generously, it inspires observers to behave generously later, toward different people. In fact, the researchers found that altruism could spread by three degrees—from person to person to person to person. “As a result,” they write, “each person in a network can influence dozens or even hundreds of people, some of whom he or she does not know and has not met.”

Giving has also been linked to the release of oxytocin, a hormone (also released during sex and breast feeding) that induces feelings of warmth, euphoria, and connection to others. In laboratory studies, Paul Zak, the director of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies at Claremont Graduate University, has found that a dose of oxytocin will cause people to give more generously and to feel more empathy towards others, with “symptoms” lasting up to two hours. And those people on an “oxytocin high” can potentially jumpstart a “virtuous circle, where one person’s generous behavior triggers another’s,” says Zak.

**Being Near Nature Improves Physical, Mental Health**

**USA Today**

**By Amanda GardnerTracker Pixel for Entry**

**October 15, 2009**

The closer you live to nature, the healthier you're likely to be.

For instance, people who live within 1 kilometer (.6 miles) of a park or wooded area experience less anxiety and depression, Dutch researchers report.

The findings put concrete numbers on a concept that many health experts had assumed to be true.

"It's nice to see that it shows that, that the closer humans are to the natural environment, that seems to have a healthy influence," said Dr. David Rakel, director of integrative medicine and assistant professor of family medicine at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health.

One previous study had noted fewer health inequalities between rich and poor people in areas with lots of green space, and other studies have echoed these health benefits. But much of this research had relied on people's perceptions of their physical and mental health.

This new objective look at the matter involved scouring medical records of 345,143 people in Holland, assessing health status for 24 conditions, including cardiovascular, respiratory and neurological diseases. This information was then correlated with how much green space was located within 1 kilometer and 3 kilometers of a person's postal code.

People living in more urban environments had a higher prevalence of 15 of the 24 conditions, with the relationship strongest for anxiety disorder and depression.

In areas with only 10% of green space, about 2.6% of people experienced anxiety disorders, compared to 1.8% of people in areas with 90% green space. The disparity was evident for depression as well — 3.2% of people living in more urbanized areas had depression versus 2.4% of those in more rural areas.

The health benefits were evident only when the green acres were within a kilometer, not at the 3 kilometer perimeter, except for anxiety disorders, gastrointestinal digestive disorders and so-called medically unexplained physical symptoms, the researchers said.

Children and poor people suffered disproportionately from lack of green acres, the researchers found.

The study findings were published online Thursday in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*.

Any number of factors could account for the benefits of green space, experts said.

More natural sunlight, for instance, has been linked with a lower incidence of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) and other benefits.

"If patients in hospitals have direct exposure to sunlight through a window or natural sunlight, hospital stays are shorter and patients have less complications," Rakel said. "That's been well-established.

More light also means more vitamin D in the skin, which has been found to elevate mood and improve muscle strength, he added.

And fresh air, obviously, has a benefit as well, as do the exercise opportunities that come with more open space.

But much of the relief may come from the simple ability to de-stress.

"If we're in a busy street with more technology and artificial things, we're going to be multi-tasking more, which prevents us from focusing on one thing," Rakel said. "In this day and age, we really need some sort of centering practice. We need to get our mind out of its own stories and focus on something that's pure. Nature is a beautiful example of that — it's the way things were meant to be."

This study has "implications not only for city planning but also for indoor design and architecture," said Richard Ryan, professor of psychology, psychiatry and education at the [University of Rochester](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Organizations/Schools/University+of+Rochester) Medical Center. But the benefit is proportional to how much people pay attention to nature, he said.

"If they're in their heads and not paying attention, it doesn't do them much good," said Ryan, co-author of a recent study report that people who are exposed to natural elements are more socially oriented, more generous and value community more. Another experiment he was involved in found that people who spent time outdoors had more vitality and energy.

More green space may also be a way for whole communities to become healthier.

"As health-care costs spiral out of control, it behooves us to think about our green space in terms of preventive health care," said Dr. Kathryn J. Kotrla, associate dean and chair of psychiatry and behavioral science at Texas A&M Health Science Center College of Medicine Round Rock campus. "This highlights very clearly that our Western notion of body-mind duality is entirely false. The study shows that we are a whole organism, and when we get healthy that means our body and our mind get healthy."

**Sunshine & Happiness Study Links Time Outdoors To Improved Mood**

**The Huffington Post**

**By Jacqueline Howard**

**October 6, 2013**

Are sunny skies overhead the key to a sunny disposition? New research from the United Arab Emirates shows a strong link between positive moods and time spent outdoors in sunlight.

"This is just a pilot study and we need larger sample size but we found that behavioral change is associated with mood change and vitamin D status," study co-author Dr. Fatme Al Anouti, an assistant professor in Zayed University's [college of sustainability sciences and humanities](http://www.zu.ac.ae/main/en/colleges/colleges/college_of_sustainability_sciences_and_humanities/department_of_Natural_science_and_public_health/_faculty_profileNSPH/Fatme_AlAnouti.aspx), told The Huffington Post in an email. "So participants who adopted a more outdoor lifestyle got better in terms of mood and vitamin D status."

For the study, researchers identified 20 individuals with depressive symptoms and low blood levels of vitamin D from a group of more than 100 people. Some of these individuals were encouraged to spend more time in the sun for seven weeks while others were encouraged simply to see a doctor, Abu Dhabi-based newspaper The National reported.

What did the researchers find? The individuals who were [encouraged to get more sun](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3256339/) "showed less symptoms of depression," Dr. Al Anouti told The National. "In this study we showed that if you improve your vitamin D level, you will improve your mood."

Psychologist Dr. Michael Terman, [professor at Columbia University](http://asp.cumc.columbia.edu/facdb/profile_list.asp?uni=mt12&DepAffil=Psychiatry) and author of the book "[Reset Your Inner Clock](http://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2012/08/07/how-to-reset-your-inner-clock-to-get-quality-sleep/)," told The Huffington Post in an email that this new research implies the antidepressant benefit comes from exposure to ultraviolte rays that act on the skin to stimulate vitamin D production.

But another factor may be at play.

"The primary antidepressant effect of light must lie in the visible range," he noted. "So the Zayed subjects likely showed improved mood because of increased retinal light exposure rather than increased skin exposure to UV in sunlight."

This new study is not the first to suggest a link between mood and vitamin D levels. A 2006 study linked [vitamin D deficiency in older adults](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17138809) with lower moods. More recently, research at the Loyola University Chicago Niehoff School of Nursing showed that [vitamin D supplements improved the moods](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/06/130625091841.htm) of women with type 2 diabetes and signs of depression.

"But the data for antidepressant benefit are not definitive," Dr. Terman said. The [body makes vitamin D](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/002405.htm) in response to sun exposure. Other sources of the vitamin include dairy products, fatty fish, and oysters.

"The Zayed researchers made a valuable contribution in documenting antidepressant light responsivity in a population living at a southerly latitude, where outdoor light is always plentiful," Dr. Terman said. "Their attribution of the beneficial effect to enhanced vitamin D levels, however, is doubtful."

**Yoga Could Help Teens Ward Off Anxiety, Study Shows**

**The Huffington Post**

**By Amanda L. Chan**

**April 8, 2012**

Considering yoga's stress-busting effects, one would think that [high-schoolers might benefit](http://www.unboundmedicine.com/medline/ebm/record/22343481/abstract/Benefits_of_Yoga_for_Psychosocial_Well_Being_in_a_US_High_School_Curriculum:_A_Preliminary_Randomized_Controlled_Trial_) from the practice.

And now, a study shows that yoga *does* confer benefits to teens. The research is published in the [*Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics*](http://www.unboundmedicine.com/medline/ebm/record/22343481/abstract/Benefits_of_Yoga_for_Psychosocial_Well_Being_in_a_US_High_School_Curriculum:_A_Preliminary_Randomized_Controlled_Trial_).

Researchers from Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School conducted their study on 51 junior and senior high school students. Some of the students did a 10-week yoga PE class, and some did a regular PE class. The yoga PE class included Kripalu yoga, which included meditation, relaxation and breathing exercises, along with yoga poses.

At the beginning of the 10 week study, all the students took a number of psychological tests for things like mood problems, anxiety, mindfulness, resilience and anger expression.

The researchers found that by the end of the study, the teens who did yoga scored higher on some of the psychological tests, while the teens who didn't do yoga scored worse on some of the tests. For example, teens who did not do yoga during their PE classes scored higher for mood problems or anxiety, while those who *did* do yoga scored lower on these tests, or their scores remained the same from the beginning of the study period.

In addition, the teens who didn't do yoga reported more negative emotions during the study period, while the teens who did do yoga reported fewer negative emotions.

Plus, the study seemed to show that the teens liked the yoga classes -- the researchers reported that almost 75 percent of the teens who did yoga said they would like to keep taking yoga.

"Yoga may serve a preventive role in adolescent mental health," study researcher Jessica Noggle, Ph.D., of Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, said [in a statement](http://www.newswise.com/articles/yoga-shows-psychological-benefits-for-high-school-students).

### Altruism & Happiness

**PBS, This Emotional Life Series**

**Source: The How of Happiness, by Sonja Lyubormirsky**

As long as acts of kindness don't become obligatory or overwhelming, they can enrich the giver and whole community.

Altruism in all its forms--kindness, generosity, compassion, volunteering, and donating money--has the potential to reward the giver as much or more than the recipient.

### Acts of kindness

Altruism—including kindness, generosity, and compassion—are keys to the social connections that are so important to our happiness. Research finds that acts of kindness—especially spontaneous, out-of-the ordinary ones—can boost happiness in the person doing the good deed.

**Reasons why acts of kindness make people happier:**

* Being generous leads us to perceive others more compassionately; we typically find good qualities in people to whom we are kind
* Being kind promotes a sense of connection and community with others, which is one of the strongest factors in increasing happiness
* Being generous helps us appreciate and feel grateful for our own good fortune
* Being generous boosts our self-image; it helps us feel useful and gives us a way to use our strengths and talents in a meaningful way
* Being kind can start a chain reaction of positivity; being kind to others may lead them to be grateful and generous to others, who in turn are grateful and kind to others

**Volunteers see greater benefits than those they are serving**

One study followed women with multiple sclerosis (MS) who volunteered as peer supporters to other patients. They received training in compassionate listening techniques and called the patients to talk and listen for 15 minutes at a time. The study followed the volunteers for three years and found that they had increased self-esteem, self-acceptance, satisfaction, self-efficacy, social activity, and feelings of mastery. The positive outcomes for the volunteers were even greater than for the patients they were helping.

**Compassion fosters happiness, but being sacrificial reduces well-being**

Being kind and compassionate is linked to greater happiness, greater levels of physical activity well into old age, and longevity. One important caveat: if people get overextended and overwhelmed by helping tasks, as can happen with people who are caregivers to family members, their health and quality of life can rapidly decline. It seems being generous from an abundance of time, money, and energy can promote well-being; but being sacrificial quickly lowers well-being. This seems to be a good argument for communities sharing the burden for everyone’s benefit.

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**4 Amazing Health Benefits Of Helping Others**

**Huffington Post**

**By Leslie Goldman**

**January 28, 2013**

As a boy, whenever Stephen Post got a bad grade, or felt left out of his older brother and sister's games, or was otherwise having a rough day, his mother always said, "Why don't you go out and do something for someone else?" At which point he'd head next door to rake Mr. Mueller's leaves or go across the street to help Mr. Lawrence with his boat. "I always came home feeling better," says Post, now a professor of preventive medicine at Stony Brook University School of Medicine and author of [*The Hidden Gifts of Helping*](http://www.amazon.com/The-Hidden-Gifts-Helping-Compassion/dp/0470887818). Turns out, there was science behind his mom's kitchen-table wisdom: Practicing philanthropy is one of the surest steps you can take toward a happy, healthy life. Here's why.

**Longer Lifespan**   
A 2013 review of 40 international studies suggests that volunteering can add years to your life -- with some evidence pointing to a 22 percent reduction in mortality. How much time must you spare? A separate study found that seniors who gave 100 hours or more annually were 28 percent less likely to die from any cause than their less-philanthropic counterparts. "But that's not a magic number -- it could be 75 hours or 125," says study coauthor Elizabeth Lightfoot, PhD, an associate professor at the University of Minnesota School of Social Work. "The important thing is that you're doing it regularly." And you needn't be older to benefit. A new study in JAMA Pediatrics found that high school students saw a drop in their cholesterol levels after volunteering with younger kids once a week for two months.

**Greater Happiness**   
When you read to the elderly, walk a 5K for cancer, or even plunk a quarter in the Salvation Army kettle, the reward center of your brain pumps out the mood-elevating neurotransmitter dopamine, creating what researchers call a helper's high. In fact, one study found that people who completed five small acts of kindness (like helping a friend, visiting a relative, or writing a thank-you note) one day a week for six weeks experienced a significant boost in overall feelings of well-being. Interestingly, those who spread their goodwill over the course of a week showed no such boost. "Our research suggests there's a threshold of giving that you need to reach before it has an impact," says study coauthor Sonja Lyubomirsky, PhD, a psychology professor at the University of California, Riverside. "Each action has a cumulative effect. The more nice things you do, the more people will respond positively toward you, and the better you'll feel."

**Better Pain Management**   
When chronic-pain sufferers helped others with the same ailment, they reported feeling less discomfort, according to a study in Pain Management Nursing. On a scale of 0 to 10, people's average pain ratings dropped from nearly a 6 to below 4 after volunteer training and six months of leading discussion groups for pain sufferers or making weekly calls to check in on patients. "People living with chronic pain can often feel helpless about their condition, but recognizing the positive effect they had on others in the same situation gave them a sense of purpose," says study coauthor Paul Arnstein, PhD, a clinical nurse specialist for pain relief at Massachusetts General Hospital. "In turn, that gave them more confidence to find ways of managing their own discomfort." This kind of volunteering can work with other conditions, too: A study in the journal Social Science & Medicine found that after individuals living with multiple sclerosis offered emotional support to other MS sufferers via monthly phone calls, the helpers were less prone to depression and anxiety.

**Lower Blood Pressure**   
A 2013 study in the journal Psychology and Aging revealed that adults over the age of 50 who reported volunteering at least 200 hours in the past year (roughly four hours per week) were 40 percent less likely than nonvolunteers to have developed hypertension four years later. Though researchers don't fully understand why giving back can have such a marked impact on blood pressure, they believe it may be linked to the stress-reducing effects of being both active and altruistic. "As we get older, our social networks shrink," says study coauthor Rodlescia Sneed. "Volunteering may offer an opportunity to establish more social connections and form new bonds with people who care about you and motivate you to take care of yourself."

# Helping Others Helps You to Live Longer

# Time Magazine

# By Maia Szalavitz

# August 23, 2013

Want a longer life?  Volunteer to do good and you might benefit at least as much. Visiting the sick, feeding the hungry and chairing that committee no one else wants to touch are morally admirable— but being selfless can also be good for both body and soul.

A new review of the health effects of volunteering found that helping others on a regular basis — like serving food in a soup kitchen or reading to the blind— can reduce early mortality rates by 22%, compared to those in people who don’t participate in such activities.

The [review](http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/13/773/abstract), which included 40 studies and was published in *BMC Public Health,* also revealed that volunteers benefit from reduced rates of [depression](http://topics.time.com/depression/) and an increased sense of life satisfaction and well being — doing good, it seems, made them feel good. “Our systematic review shows that volunteering is associated with improvements in health,” lead author Dr. Suzanne Richards of the University of Exeter Medical School in England said in a statement.

But don’t expect to reap the benefits of longevity after tossing a few coins in the next charity collection you encounter. It takes regular sacrifice of time and effort to engage the sense of reward that comes from volunteering— in the research, participants volunteered at least an hour of work, once a month and often, pitched in more frequently.

Helping others probably benefits health by increasing social contact and reducing loneliness, which another [review](http://www.plosmedicine.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316) found to be as dangerous as smoking in contributing to high blood pressure, [heart attacks](http://topics.time.com/heart-attacks/), strokes and [dementia](http://topics.time.com/dementia/).  In contrast, socializing with friends and family — which volunteer work promotes — [lowers](http://healthland.time.com/2011/05/02/friends-with-benefits-being-highly-social-cuts-dementia-risk-by-70/) dementia risk.

But taken too extremes, even being selfless can be too much of a good thing. The authors found some  studies that suggested people who sacrificed in order to care for family members could become less healthy both emotionally and physically, since they are frequently overwhelmed with conflicting responsibilities. The same can be true for other types of volunteering, if the activities start to become a burden rather than a relief.

“There may be a fine line between volunteering enough to experience mental health benefits (up to 10 hours a month) and spending too much time volunteering so it becomes another commitment,” the authors write. “If volunteering becomes a burden, this may lead to ‘burnout.’”

They also note that more work is needed to understand whether volunteering actually improves health and leads to longer lives; it may be that volunteers are generally more active and socially engaged, and therefore healthier to begin with.

Scientists will also want to better understand whether volunteering to reap benefits for your own health and longevity mitigates the feel-good effects of pitching in; presumably altruism and the satisfaction that comes from connecting with others as you help them is important to the benefits.

To promote those advantages, the United Nations as well as many European governments are encouraging more citizens to volunteer, to improve social networks in local communities and possibly even advance public health and public safety. Only 27% of Americans and 22% of Europeans volunteer at all, compared to 36% of Australians. Even if people start pitching in for selfish reasons — to live longer or improve their own health— the hope is that the spirit of giving will end up sustaining more good works.

# 5 Side Effects of Kindness on Health

# Good News Network

# by David R Hamilton

# February 11, 2015

##### **1) Kindness Makes us Happier**

When we do something kind for someone else, we feel good. On a spiritual level, many people feel that this is because it is the right thing to do and so we’re tapping into something deep and profound inside of us that says, ‘This is who I am.’

On a biochemical level, it is believed that the good feeling we get is due to elevated levels of the brain’s natural versions of morphine and heroin, which we know as endogenous opioids. They cause elevated levels of dopamine in the brain and so we get a natural high, often referred to as ‘Helper’s High’.

##### **2) Kindness Gives us Healthier Hearts**

Acts of kindness are often accompanied by emotional warmth. Emotional warmth produces the hormone, oxytocin, in the brain and throughout the body. Of recent interest is its significant role in the cardiovascular system.

Oxytocin causes the release of a chemical called nitric oxide in blood vessels, which dilates (expands) the blood vessels. This reduces blood pressure and therefore oxytocin is known as a ‘cardioprotective’ hormone because it protects the heart (by lowering blood pressure). The key is that acts kindness can produce oxytocin and therefore kindness can be said to be cardioprotective.

##### **3) Kindness Slows Aging**

Aging on a biochemical level is a combination of many things, but two culprits that speed the process are Free Radicals and Inflammation, both of which result from making unhealthy lifestyle choices.

But remarkable research now shows that oxytocin (that we produce through emotional warmth) reduces levels of free radicals and inflammation in the cardiovascular system and so slows aging at source. Incidentally these two culprits also play a major role in heart disease so this is also another reason why kindness is good for the heart.

There have also been suggestions in the scientific journals of the strong link between compassion and the activity of the vagus nerve. The vagus nerve, as well as regulating heart rate, also controls inflammation levels in the body. [One study](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2695992/) that used the Tibetan Buddhist’s ‘Loving Kindness Compassion’ meditation found that kindness and compassion did, in fact, reduce inflammation in the body, mostly likely due to its effects on the vagus nerve.

##### **4) Kindness Makes for Better Relationships**

This is one of the most obvious points. We all know that we like people who show us kindness. This is because kindness reduces the emotional distance between two people and so we feel more ‘bonded’. It’s something that is so strong in us that it’s actually a genetic thing. We are wired for kindness.

Our evolutionary ancestors had to learn to cooperate with one another. The stronger the emotional bonds within groups, the greater were the chances of survival and so ‘kindness genes’ were etched into the human genome.

So today when we are kind to each other we feel a connection and new relationships are forged, or existing ones strengthened.

##### **5) Kindness is Contagious**

When we’re kind we inspire others to be kind and studies show that it actually creates a ripple effect that spreads outwards to our friends’ friends’ friends – to 3-degrees of separation. Just as a pebble creates waves when it is dropped in a pond, so acts of kindness ripple outwards touching others’ lives and inspiring kindness everywhere the wave goes.

A recent scientific study reported than an anonymous 28-year-old person walked into a clinic and donated a kidney. It set off a ‘pay it forward’ type ripple effect where the spouses or other family members of recipients of a kidney donated one of theirs to someone else in need. The ‘domino effect’, as it was called in the New England Journal of Medicine report, spanned the length and breadth of the United States of America, where 10 people received a new kidney as a consequence of that anonymous donor.

**The Science of Good Deeds: The 'Helper's High' Could Help You Live a Longer, Healthier Life**

**WebMD Feature**

**By Jeanie Lerche Davis**

It's a classic tale, the story of Ebenezer Scrooge -- the epitome of selfishness, the quintessential mean-spirited, miserly, narcissistic old man. Yet as Scrooge discovers the joy of good deeds, he blooms with the "helper's high" - and his spirit is reborn. And a merrier man had never been seen, as the story goes.

In the last few years, researchers have looked at the so-called helper's high and its effects on the human body. Scientists are searching to understand just how altruism -- the wish to perform good deeds -- affects our health, even our longevity.

Acts of heroism are one form of altruism -- as we saw on 9/11, when firemen rushed into the World Trade Center. Many firemen, chaplains, and citizens joined the rescue and recovery effort, working grueling 12-hour shifts.

In everyday life, countless people choose to give up free time to volunteer -- whether it's serving at soup kitchens, cleaning up litter, taking elderly people to the grocery store, or helping a next-door neighbor.

What prompts a human being to act heroically? What makes us perform good deeds? When we act on behalf of other people, research shows that they feel greater comfort, less stress. But what about the do-gooder's physiology -- how is it affected? Can doing good make us healthier, as a growing number of scientists now believe? Can it even, as studies suggest, help us live longer?

This is the focus of 50 scientific studies funded through The Institute for Research on Unlimited Love, headed by Stephen G. Post, PhD, a professor of bioethics at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine. It is a comprehensive investigation of altruism, aka benevolence, compassion, generosity, and kindness.

**The Innate Need to Do Good**

It's no surprise that, when we're on the receiving end of love, we reap a benefit. "There are ample studies showing that when people receive generosity and compassion, there is a positive effect on their health and well-being," Post tells WebMD.

Examples: "When a compassionate physician creates a safe haven for the ill patient, the patient experiences relief from stress," he explains. "One study showed that when men felt loved by their wives, they were less likely to experience [chest pain](http://www.webmd.com/heart-disease/tc/chest-pain-topic-overview) that might signal a [heart attack](http://www.webmd.com/heart-disease/guide/heart-disease-heart-attacks)."

Only in recent years have researchers explored the scientific underpinnings of the notion that "doing good" is indeed a good thing -- and precisely why it is good for us. Indeed, many scientific disciplines -- evolution, genetics, human development, neurology, social science, and positive psychology -- are at the heart of this investigation, says Post.

### Linking Kindness and Health

In a paper published earlier this year, Post describes the biological underpinnings of stress -- and how altruism can be the antidote. This connection was discovered inadvertently in 1956, when a team of Cornell University researchers began following 427 married women with children. They assumed that the housewives with more children would be under greater stress and die earlier than women with few children.

"Surprisingly, they found that numbers of children, education, class, and work status did not affect longevity," writes Post. After following these women for 30 years, researchers found that 52% of those who did not volunteer had experienced a major illness -- compared with 36% who did volunteer.

Two large studies found that older adults who volunteered reaped benefits in their health and well-being. Those who volunteered were living longer than nonvolunteers. Another large study found a 44% reduction in early death among those who volunteered a lot -- a greater effect than [exercising](http://www.webmd.com/fitness-exercise/fitness-toc-old) four times a week, Post reports.

In the 1990s, one famous study examined personal essays written by nuns in the 1930s. Researchers found that nuns who expressed the most positive emotions were living about 10 years longer than those who expressed the fewest such emotions.

### The Science of Altruism

When we engage in good deeds, we reduce our own stress -- including the physiological changes that occur when we're stressed. During this stress response, hormones like cortisol are released, and our heart and breathing rates increase -- the "fight or flight" response.

If this stress response remains "turned on" for an extended period, the immune and cardiovascular systems are adversely affected -- weakening the body's defenses, making it more susceptible to abnormal cellular changes, Post explains. These changes can ultimately lead to a downward spiral -- abnormal cellular changes that cause premature aging.

"Studies of telomeres -- the end-caps of our genes -- show that long-term stress can shorten those end-caps, and shortened end-caps are linked with early death," he tells WebMD. "These studies indicate that we're dealing with something that's extremely powerful. Ultimately, the process of cultivating a positive emotional state through pro-social behaviors -- being generous -- may lengthen your life."

Altruistic emotions -- the "helper's high" -- seem to gain dominance over the stress response, Post explains. The actual physiological responses of the helper's high have not yet been scientifically studied. However, a few small studies point to lowered stress response and improved immunity (higher levels of protective antibodies) when one is feeling empathy and love.

In one study, older adults who volunteered to give [massage](http://www.webmd.com/balance/massage-therapy-styles-and-health-benefits) to infants had lowered stress hormones. In another study, students were simply asked to watch a film of Mother Teresa's work with the poor in Calcutta. They had significant increases in protective antibodies associated with improved immunity -- and antibody levels remained high for an hour afterward. Students who watched a more neutral film didn't have changes in antibody levels. "Thus, 'dwelling on love' strengthened the immune system," writes Post.

### Compassion in the Brain

There's evidence in brain studies of a "compassion-altruism axis," Post tells WebMD. Utilizing functional MRI scans, scientists have identified specific regions of the brain that are very active during deeply empathic and compassionate emotions, he explains. A new mother's brain -- specifically, the prefrontal lobe -- becomes very active when she looks at a picture of her own baby, compared to other babies' pictures.

"This is extremely important," Post says. "This is the care-and-connection part of the brain. It is a very different part of the brain than is active with romantic love. These brain studies show this profound state of joy and delight that comes from giving to others. It doesn't come from any dry action -- where the act is out of duty in the narrowest sense, like writing a check for a good cause. It comes from working to cultivate a generous quality -- from interacting with people. There is the smile, the tone in the voice, the touch on the shoulder. We're talking about altruistic love."

Brain chemicals also enter into this picture of altruism. A recent study has identified high levels of the "bonding" hormone oxytocin in people who are very generous toward others. Oxytocin is the hormone best known for its role in preparing mothers for motherhood. Studies have also shown that this hormone helps both men and women establish trusting [relationships](http://www.webmd.com/sex-relationships/guide/default.htm).

### The Evolution of Kindness

"Humans have evolved to be caring and helpful to those around us, largely to ensure our survival," says Post. "In Darwin's Descent of Man, he mentions survival of the fittest only twice. He mentions benevolence 99 times."

Humans are mammals, and like other mammals we are social animals. As we evolved, our social bonds helped ensure our survival, explains Harvard psychiatry associate professor Gregory L. Fricchione, MD. Fricchione is working on a book about brain evolution and the development of human altruism.

"If it is evolutionarily beneficial for human beings to benefit from social support, you would expect that evolution would provide the species with the capacity to provide social support," he tells WebMD. "This is where the human capacity for altruism may come from."

### The Impact of Genetics and Environment

An interplay of our genetics and our environment - especially in our early years - will play into whether we develop into altruistic individuals. "It's a bit like the traits of shyness and extroversion; people are found at all parts of the spectrum. You would expect that some people would have the capacity to be more altruistic than others -- and some preliminary findings that suggest how this capacity may emerge," says Fricchione, who is also associate chief of psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

He's referring to a small study published recently, which looked at oxytocin levels in children's urine while they interacted with their parents. One group was composed of orphans who had spent the first 16 months of life in overseas orphanages - neglected before being adopted by U.S. families. The other group of kids had been raised in stable, caring homes during their earliest years.

The adopted orphans had produced lower levels of urinary oxytocin after being with their mothers, compared with children raised in nurturing homes since birth. "This may be a clue to a 'window of opportunity' in children's development, that those who grow up to be empathic, caring, and more altruistic in later life were nurtured more in their earlier years," Fricchione says. "That nurturing may help develop the altruistic capacity."

Future research might focus on whether the experience of being well cared for in early childhood could enhance the development of so-called "mirror neurons" that enable us to have empathic responses to the emotional states we witness in others, he says.

### The Healing Hormone

Indeed, oxytocin may be connected to both physical and emotional well-being, says Fricchione. "Oxytocin is the mediator of what has been called the 'tend-mend' response, as opposed to the 'fight-flight' response to stress. When you're altruistic and touching people in a positive way, lending a helping hand, your oxytocin level goes up - and that relieves your own stress."

In one animal study, researchers looked at the numerous effects that oxytocin can produce in lab rats -- lower blood pressure, lower levels of stress hormones, and an overall calming effect.

Altruistic behavior may also trigger the brain's reward circuitry -- the 'feel-good' chemicals like dopamine and endorphins, and perhaps even a morphine-like chemical the body naturally produces, Fricchione explains. "If altruistic behavior plugs into that reward circuitry, it will have the potential to reduce the stress response. And if the altruistic behavior continues to be rewarding, it will be reinforced."

Again, Scrooge is a good example, says Post. "He comes alive because of his benevolent affections and emotions. What's really happening is that he's tapping into the whole neurology, endocrinology, and immunology of generosity.

"All the great spiritual traditions and the field of positive psychology are emphatic on this point -- that the best way to get rid of bitterness, anger, rage, jealousy is to do unto others in a positive way," Post tells WebMD. "It's as though you somehow have to cast out negative emotions that are clearly associated with stress -- cast them out with the help of positive emotions."

# How One Word Can Change Your New Year

**FastCompany.com**

**By Stephanie Vozza**

**January 6, 2015**

Experts say narrowing down your goals to one word rather than making the same old resolutions may point you in the right direction in 2015.

Odds are that you will fail.

According to a [study by the University of Scranton](http://www.statisticbrain.com/new-years-resolution-statistics/), about 92% of us will fail at losing weight, saving money, getting organized, or anything else we resolve to do. But that won’t stop us. More than half of us keep trying year after year even if we don’t follow through.

Broken resolutions are what prompted [Mike Ashcraft](http://www.fastcompany.com/person/mike-ashcraft), pastor of [Port City Community Church](http://www.fastcompany.com/organization/port-city-community-church) in Wilmington, North Carolina, to take a different tactic. Instead of making—and breaking—another promise to himself, he decided to pick one word and stick with it for a year. He chose "flow," and used it as a lens though which he’d approach personal change.

"It felt doable, memorable, and sticky," he says. "Choosing one word solved the attention problem I had with resolutions, and helped me become [laser](http://www.fastcompany.com/technology/laser) focused. The results were greater than I expected."

Ashcraft took the concept to his congregation the following year, and the results were surprising. "I’d be in the grocery line or in traffic at a red light, and people would stop me to tell me what their word was," he says. "They were excited about it, and I was amazed how quickly it stuck."

The idea spread like wildfire, and Ashcraft shared the concept in [*My One Word: Change Your Life With Just One Word*](http://www.amazon.com/My-One-Word-Change-Your/dp/0310318777) (Zondervan; 2012).

Coauthor [Rachel Olsen](http://www.fastcompany.com/person/rachel-olsen) believes the concept has been well received because resolutions are usually behavior based: "You’re going to go to the gym, stop yelling at your kids, sell X amount of units," she says. "As soon as you fail, you’ve broken the resolution. A word can’t be broken. It serves as a reminder; a filter. It’s who you want to be instead of what you regret."

The One-Word process involves three steps:

#### 1. Think About Who You Want To Be

Instead of dwelling on your bad habits, ask yourself what kind of person you want to become. Olsen says the process shifts your mindset from regret to vision.

#### 2. Make A List Of Characteristics You Desire

Once you have a picture of that person, identify their major characteristics and write them down using single words. Then take that list and look up each word’s definition.

#### 3. Pick One Word

Using your list, pick the word that resonates with you most. Some of the most popular choices include trust, patience, love, discipline, and focus. Ashcraft says it’s important to choose just one, and resist the temptation to do them all.   
  
"A lot of people have paralysis, and worry that they’ll pick the wrong word," he says. "It’s not a matter of right or wrong. There’s simplicity and beauty behind this. Often, one word can incorporate others in the way you frame things."  
  
Olsen likes to remind people that they can choose another word next year. "Make your choice and settle in," she says. "One word reduces pressure to improve in a gazillion areas, optimizing everything. It’s a filter to make decisions. When you return to your word, you return to your focus."

Sharing your word can put more power behind it, says Ashcraft.

"Talking about your resolutions can be an awkward conversation," he says. "When you choose a word and share why you picked it, it becomes a matter of the heart. It’s about hope, and that feels different than sharing your struggles. Sharing also creates accountability."

While the process has had profound results for its users, Ashcraft says there’s nothing magical about it. "When you do something long enough, it becomes part of who you are," he adds. "It can be hard, but that’s part of process. Keep your word in front of you; it will make a difference."

## The Art of Complimenting and Criticizing

**Psychology Today website**

**By Raj Raghunathan**

**July 11, 2012**

As a number of findings show, those who are good at complimenting others gain many advantages. Most obviously, when you become good at complimenting others, you enhance the chances of being liked by them, which means that you get to enjoy all of the advantages of being liked. For example, if you are liked, you will be forgiven for committing a mistake more easily and quickly, and you are also more likely to be chosen as the recipient of others' favors.

More importantly, by becoming good at complimenting others, you get to enhance both your, and the others’, well-being. Any honest person would have to admit that they would prefer to receive compliments more often than they would like to receive criticisms. This is because two of our most important needs—the need to feel important and the need to feel loved—are fulfilled when we receive compliments and are frustrated when we receive criticisms.

What is less well-known is that those who compliment others enhance their own well-being as well. There are many reasons why complimenting others enhances your own well being. Perhaps the most important reason is that, when you compliment others, you view yourself as a generous and big-hearted person. So, you increase your own [self-esteem](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/self-esteem) because you perceive yourself as a big hearted and generous person. In contrast, when you criticize others, you perceive yourself as a selfish and insecure person, thereby lowering your self-esteem.

This causal link—between criticizing others and lower self-esteem—may not be obvious. This is because, as findings on downward comparisons show, criticizing others can temporarily boost your self-esteem and make you feel good. But over time, if you start depending on this strategy to boost your self-esteem, it starts backfiring for two reasons. First, you invite reciprocal negativity from others. That is, if you routinely criticize others, you will make them feel negative, and this, in turn, will make them criticize you. Of course, you can attempt to avoid such reciprocal negativity by criticizing others behind their back, but word gets around. And even if it doesn’t, by being the type of person who routinely criticizes others, you invite the company of people who are like you—critical and unforgiving—and turn away those who are generous and positive.

In short, you stand to gain many advantages—and avoid many disadvantages—by becoming better at the art of complimenting others. Of course, all of these advantages are more likely to accrue if your compliments are authentic and not fake. In particular, it is unlikely that you will view yourself as a generous and big-hearted person if you compliment others only for the sake of receiving favors from them; indeed, it is even possible that you view yourself even more negatively in such situations because you realize, at some level, that your intentions weren’t noble.

Given all this, two important questions arise: 1) How does one become better at the art of complimenting? and 2) When—and how—does one provide negative or critical feedback to others?

Becoming better at complimenting others depends on two factors: the [motivation](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/motivation) to learn this skill and the ability to focus on other people and their needs and desires, rather than on oneself. Motivation will not be an issue for those who recognize the advantages that accrue to everyone from becoming better at complimenting others. Gaining the ability to focus on others versus oneself, however, takes practice. Few people are naturally other-focused; most of us are generally self-focused.

A good—perhaps the best—way of becoming other-focused is to force yourself to get into the habit of finding something to compliment about whoever is around you. For example, although you may not have liked either the content or the style of a presentation, you can still find something about the presentation that you genuinely liked. Perhaps you liked how the presenter answered questions. Or perhaps there were a couple of good jokes in the presentation. Or perhaps the presenter was well dressed. It matters less whether these aspects of the presentation are “important” or “central” to the presentation; what matters more is that you are genuine in your praise.

Making it a habit to scan your “emotional terrain” to find something genuinely praiseworthy about others goes a long way in making you better at the art of complimenting. Initially, you may not be very quick at identifying something praiseworthy; indeed, if you are habituated to criticizing others, the first things that come to your mind about others may be negative ones.

There are two important roadblocks to becoming good at finding something praiseworthy in others. First, people tend to assume that, if someone evokes a negative feeling in them-—and most of us  decide we like or dislike people within the first few seconds of meeting them-—, then this person cannot have any redeeming features. This is known as the “halo effect”: we tend to hold simplistic and consistent views of others and this makes us arrive at undifferentiated judgments of them. The truth, of course, is that we are all a combination of several negative and several positive features. Second, many people have a great desire to come across as “honest” and “straightforward,” and too many of us make the mistake of assuming that the only way of conveying our honesty and straightforwardness is by being bluntly critical.

So, an important milestone in becoming better at complimenting others is not just to recognize these roadblocks, but also be motivated to overcome them. Those who do overcome them will discover that complimenting others becomes just as natural and spontaneous as criticizing them used to be. Indeed, there comes a stage when complimenting others becomes “unconditional”—that is, one no longer compliments for the sake of receiving reciprocal favors.

This is a very important stage because, as those who reach this stage will discover, the  interactions one has with others become far more interesting and meaningful after this stage. There is a good reason why. When you offer genuine praise to others, you don’t just make them feel good, but you also gain their trust. Everyone knows, or eventually gets to know, what they are genuinely good at. Thus, when you offer authentic praise, the others recognize this authenticity, which enhances their trust in you. This, in turn, makes them reveal more of themselves, including their insecurities, to you. In other words, by mastering the art of complimenting, you trigger in others the tendency to expose their real—as opposed to their “public relations”—self to you, which promotes reciprocity from your end, leading to authentic, deep and far more interesting, conversations.

This brings us to the second question: how does one become better at the art of criticizing or critiquing others?

As you may have noticed, providing negative feedback is much more difficult than is providing compliments. Usually, providing negative feedback does not result in positive outcomes either for oneself or for others; indeed, almost always, providing others with negative feedback—even if it is done with good intentions—generates “lose-lose” situations. But there are people who are particularly good at providing negative feedback. Although receiving negative feedback from these people can hurt, there is something about the way in which they provide the feedback that makes us focus less on the emotional negativity and more on using the feedback constructively to become better at something.

There are three important features in people who are good at providing negative feedback. First, they are genuinely un-self-centered. In other words, there is no hidden-agenda for providing negative feedback. The receiver of feedback feels confident that the feedback is being given to them with the sole purpose of improving their life, and not to take [revenge](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/punishment) on them. A tell-tale sign of genuinely un-self-centered feedback is that the feedback provider isn’t angry or anxious when giving the feedback. On a side note, if you notice that you are getting tight and tense when providing negative feedback, it’s a sign that you may be entering "self-centered" territory.

People who are good at providing negative feedback are also high in self-esteem and self-worth. This is important because, at times, the receiver of constructive criticism may lash back at the feedback-giver and the person giving the negative feedback needs to have the mental and emotional strength to not turn vengeful.

Finally, people good at providing negative feedback are socially intelligent. So, they pick and choose the moment in which they want to share criticism. Unless forced to, they don’t provide negative feedback in a pre-determined fashion, but rather, wait for the right opportunity. There is a good reason why. People are rarely in the mood to receive and digest negative feedback in a non-defensive fashion. Our natural tendency is to be defensive; that is, to find arguments for why the feedback does not have merit. So, those who are good at providing negative feedback do so only when they are confident that the receiver is mentally capable of handling it. [As some of my own findings show](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/sapient-nature/201105/which-is-more-important-truth-or-happiness), people are better at receiving negative feedback when they are in a good mood. Those who are good at the art of criticizing know this instinctively, and wait for moments in which the recipient is feeling good before providing them with the negative feedback. They recognize the importance of making sure that the receiver is capable of receiving negative feedback at every moment in the conversation. As such, good criticizers don’t follow a pre-set script when giving negative feedback. It is important to know when to throw in a compliment as an “emotional buffer” that helps the receiver absorb the negative feedback. A feedback-provider’s high level of social [intelligence](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/intelligence) is also reflected in the language that they use. They realize that certain words and terms (e.g., the word, “you”) are incendiary and so, they are adept at avoiding them.

Complimenting and criticizing can be challenging. There are people who are better at generating the initial emotional positivity, but these same people might squander opportunities to develop deep and meaningful relationships by being perceived as inauthentic. Others appear to suffer from the opposite problem. They may be too wedded to the idea of being honest and direct and, as such, don’t work as hard looking for positive things in others. So, they end up squandering opportunities to develop and nurture relationships that do not start promisingly, but may in fact have turned out to be very good later on.

Bottom of Form

# Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Self-Actualization

**Simply Psychology**

**By Saul McLeod**

**Published 2007, updated 2014**

American psychologist Abraham Maslow wanted to understand what motivates people. He believed that people possess a set of motivation systems unrelated to [rewards](http://www.simplypsychology.org/operant-conditioning.html) or [unconscious desires](http://www.simplypsychology.org/psyche.html).

Maslow (1943) stated that people are motivated to achieve certain needs. When one need is fulfilled a person seeks to fulfill the next one, and so on.

The earliest and most widespread version of Maslow's (1943, 1954) hierarchy of needs includes five motivational needs, often depicted as hierarchical levels within a pyramid.



This five stage model can be divided into basic (or deficiency) needs (e.g. physiological, safety, love, and esteem) and growth needs (self-actualization).

The deficiency, or basic needs are said to motivate people when they are unmet. Also, the need to fulfill such needs will become stronger the longer the duration they are denied. For example, the longer a person goes without food the more hungry they will become.

One must satisfy lower level basic needs before progressing on to meet higher level growth needs. Once these needs have been reasonably satisfied, one may be able to reach the highest level called self-actualization.

Every person is capable and has the desire to move up the hierarchy toward a level of self-actualization. Unfortunately, progress is often disrupted by failure to meet lower level needs.

Maslow noted only one in a hundred people become fully self-actualized because our society rewards motivation primarily based on esteem, love and other social needs.

**The Original Hierarchy of Needs "Five-Stage Model" includes:**

1. Biological and Physiological needs - air, food, drink, shelter, warmth, sex, sleep.

2. Safety needs - protection from elements, security, order, law, stability, freedom from fear.

3. Love and belongingness needs - friendship, intimacy, affection and love, - from work group, family, friends, romantic relationships.

4. Esteem needs - achievement, mastery, independence, status, dominance, prestige, self-respect, respect from others.

5. Self-Actualization needs - realizing personal potential, self-fulfillment, seeking personal growth and peak experiences.

Maslow posited that human needs are arranged in a hierarchy:

'It is quite true that man lives by bread alone — when there is no bread. But what happens to man’s desires when there is plenty of bread and when his belly is chronically filled?

At once other (and “higher”) needs emerge and these, rather than physiological hungers, dominate the organism. And when these in turn are satisfied, again new (and still “higher”) needs emerge and so on. This is what we mean by saying that the basic human needs are organized into a hierarchy of relative prepotency' (Maslow, 1943, p. 375).

**The Expanded Hierarchy of Needs:**

It is important to note that Maslow's (1943, 1954) five stage model has been expanded to include cognitive and aesthetic needs (Maslow, 1970a) and later transcendence needs (Maslow, 1970b).

1. Biological and Physiological needs - air, food, drink, shelter, warmth, sex, sleep, etc.

2. Safety needs - protection from elements, security, order, law, stability, etc.

3. Love and belongingness needs - friendship, intimacy, affection and love, - from work group, family, friends, romantic relationships.

4. Esteem needs - self-esteem, achievement, mastery, independence, status, dominance, prestige, managerial responsibility, etc.

5. Cognitive needs - knowledge, meaning, etc.

6. Aesthetic needs - appreciation and search for beauty, balance, form, etc.

7. Self-Actualization needs - realizing personal potential, self-fulfillment, seeking personal growth and peak experiences.

8. Transcendence needs - helping others to achieve self actualization.

**Self-Actualization**

Instead of focusing on [psychopathology](http://www.simplypsychology.org/abnormal-psychology.html) and what goes wrong with people, Maslow (1943) formulated a more positive account of human behavior which focused on what goes right. He was interested in human potential, and how we fulfill that potential. Self-actualized people are those who were fulfilled and doing all they were capable of.

The growth of self-actualization (Maslow, 1962) refers to the need for personal growth and discovery that is present throughout a person’s life. For Maslow, a person is always 'becoming' and never remains static in these terms. In self-actualization a person comes to find a meaning to life that is important to them.

As each person is unique the motivation for self-actualization leads people in different directions (Kenrick et al., 2010). For some people self-actualization can be achieved through creating works of art or literature, for others through sport, in the classroom, or within a corporate setting.

Maslow (1962) believed self-actualization could be measured through the concept of peak experiences. This occurs when a person experiences the world totally for what it is, and there are feelings of euphoria, joy and wonder.

It is important to note that self-actualization is a continual process of becoming rather than a perfect state one reaches of a 'happy ever after' (Hoffman, 1988).

Maslow offers the following description of self-actualization:

'It refers to the person’s desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially. The specific form that these needs will take will of course vary greatly from person to person. In one individual it may take the form of the desire to be an ideal mother, in another it may be expressed athletically, and in still another it may be expressed in painting pictures or in inventions' (Maslow, 1943, p. 382–383).

## 

## Some of the Characteristics of Self-Actualized People

Although we are all, theoretically, capable of self-actualizing, most of us will not do so, or only to a limited degree. Maslow (1970) estimated that only two percent of people will reach the state of self actualization. He was particularly interested in the characteristics of people whom he considered to have achieved their potential as persons.

By studying 18 people he considered to be self-actualized (including Abraham Lincoln and Albert Einstein) Maslow (1970) identified 15 characteristics of a self-actualized person.

**Characteristics of self-actualizers:**

1. They perceive reality efficiently and can tolerate uncertainty;

2. Accept themselves and others for what they are;

3. Spontaneous in thought and action;

4. Problem-centered (not self-centered);

5. Unusual sense of humor;

6. Able to look at life objectively;

7. Highly creative;

8. Resistant to enculturation, but not purposely unconventional;

9. Concerned for the welfare of humanity;

10. Capable of deep appreciation of basic life-experience;

11. Establish deep satisfying interpersonal relationships with a few people;

12. Peak experiences;

13. Need for privacy;

14. Democratic attitudes;

15. Strong moral/ethical standards.

**Behavior leading to self-actualization:**

(a) Experiencing life like a child, with full absorption and concentration;

(b) Trying new things instead of sticking to safe paths;

(c) Listening to your own feelings in evaluating experiences instead of the voice of tradition, authority or the majority;

(d) Avoiding pretense ('game playing') and being honest;

(e) Being prepared to be unpopular if your views do not coincide with those of the majority;

(f) Taking responsibility and working hard;

(g) Trying to identify your defenses and having the courage to give them up.

Although people achieve self-actualization in their own unique way, they tend to share certain characteristics.  However, self-actualization is a matter of degree, 'There are no perfect human beings' (Maslow,1970a, p. 176).

It is not necessary to display all 15 characteristics to become self-actualized, and not only self-actualized people will display them. Maslow did not equate self-actualization with perfection. Self-actualization merely involves achieving ones potential. According to Maslow, less than two percent of the population achieve self-actualization.

# Each Family Dinner Adds up to Benefits for Adolescents

**USA Today**

**By Sharon Jayson**

**March 24, 2013**

Parents have heard it for years: Family dinners help kids avoid risky behaviors and may even help them in school.

But new research shows that the more frequent these dinners, the better the adolescents fare emotionally, says new research published this week in the *Journal of Adolescent Health.*

"The effect doesn't plateau after three or four dinners a week," says co-author Frank Elgar, an associate professor of psychiatry at McGill University in Montréal. "The more dinners a week the better."

With each additional dinner, researchers found fewer emotional and behavioral problems, greater emotional well-being, more trusting and helpful behaviors toward others and higher life satisfaction, regardless of gender, age or family economics. The study was based on a nationally representative sample of 26,069 Canadian adolescents ages 11 to 15 in 2010.

Participants provided information on the frequency of family dinners, how well they communicate with parents, and answered questions about their emotions, behaviors and life satisfaction.

"There's a lot we don't know about how family dinnertime goes," says Elgar, a psychologist, such as whether the TV is on during the meal, whether parents or siblings are arguing or whether family members are texting or talking on their phones rather than to each other. That's why he says that while they see a correlation, researchers can't say family dinners caused the benefits.

"We don't know if family dinners contribute to mental health, or if mental health and other behavioral problems cause some teenagers to avoid the family dinner," Elgar says.

Past research on family dinners has suggested a beneficial connection, but a study last year in the journal *Child Development* cast some doubt. The study of family dinners and breakfasts, based on longitudinal data from 21,400 U.S. kids in kindergarten through eighth grade, found "no association" with improved child outcomes, says lead author Daniel Miller, an assistant professor of social work at Boston University.

He says his study used "a more detailed and nuanced dataset" than previous research and the statistical analysis added many more controls, such as parental employment, the years of experience the children's teachers' had and other variables that could affect academics and behavior.

"Family meals might just be part of a whole lot of activities that families engage in that are good for their kids," Miller says. "It might look like it's family meals that matter."

However, the age of the children could play a role in the different findings, Miller says, since his study focused on younger kids and the new study and many of the earlier ones focused on adolescents.

"When kids get older, they are less likely to eat meals with their parents," he says. "It may be the case for older kids eating or not eating is a much more important factor than it is for younger kids."

Miller, who has read the new research, suggests that it "adds to our knowledge by suggesting that parent-adolescent communication accounts for some of the relationship between family meals and adolescent mental health."

James White, a research associate at Cardiff University in the United Kingdom, says his studies have found that frequent family meals and a positive atmosphere at the dinners are associated with lower risks of smoking, binge drinking and drunkenness. But he cautions that "the evidence on whether these associations are causal is not conclusive."

Part of the allure of family meals is the ritual, says Sharon Fruh, an associate professor of nursing at the University of South Alabama in Mobile, who co-authored a 2011 study about family dinner research in *The Journal for Nurse Practitioners.*

"Rituals are very important to everyone — especially children," says Fruh, a family nurse practitioner. "They help provide security and structure and they give a sense of belonging."

Her research review did find that many families eat dinner in front of the TV.

"What researchers are encouraging is turn off all the electronics and not just the television," she says. "There have been quite a few studies that (found) the more distractions, the less beneficial the communication around the table."

## Health and Happiness

**Time Magazine**

**June 13, 2007**

**Try New Things**

Stop putting off seeing the aurora lights, warming up in the hot springs of Greenland or learning a new instrument — just do it. If you often do one thing that makes you happy, then try another. Psychologist Rich Walker of Winston-Salem State University looked at 30,000 event memories and over 500 diaries, ranging from durations of 3 months to 4 years, and says that people who engage in a variety of experiences are more likely to retain positive emotions and minimize negative ones than people who have fewer experiences. Psychologist Barbara Fredrickson, at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, studies her broaden-and-build hypothesis of positive emotion. Her research suggests that the optimal ratio of positive to negative emotion in humans is above 3 to 1 and below 11 to 1. Walker has observed that once the ratio of positive to negative events hit 1 to 1, it opens the door to potential disorders, such as anxiety and depression.

**Count Your Blessings**

Count your blessings — but not everyday. Sonja Lyubomirsky, an experimental psychologist at UC Riverside, found that people who once a week wrote down five things they were grateful for were happier than those who did it three times a week. "It's an issue of timing or frequency," says Lyubomirsky, "When people do anything too often it loses the freshness and meaning. You need to have optimal timing." Lyubomirsky added that it has to feel right. She tried to count her blessings and hated it. "I found it hokey. It didn't work for me. Just like a diet program, what you do has to fit your lifestyle, personality and goals." In essence, gratitude might not be for everyone. But if it is, another exercise is to think of a person who has been kind to you that you've wanted to thank — a teacher, mentor or parent — and write a letter, once a week to different individuals over two months. You don't even have to send it to feel happier.

**Hear the Music**

Whether regarded as an evolutionary accident that piggybacked on language or as the gateway to our emotions, music activates parts of the brain that can trigger happiness by releasing endorphins. Music can also relax the body, sometimes into sleep as it stimulates the brain's release of melatonin. A study of older adults who listened to their choice of music during outpatient eye surgery showed that they had significantly lower heart rates and blood pressure, and their hearts did not work as hard as those who underwent surgery without music. A second study, of patients undergoing colonoscopy, showed that listening to their selection of music reduced their anxiety levels and lessened the dosage required for sedation.

**Move Your Body**

We've all heard about a "runner's high," but there are plenty of other ways to achieve that feeling. Dance. Play a sport. Work out as hard as you can. Take a walk so your stress will take a hike. Moving your body releases endorphins, the quintessential feel-good chemicals found in your brain. How endorphin release is triggered by exercise is somewhat of a controversial science because researchers don't know if it is caused by the positive emotion felt upon meeting a physical challenge or from the exertion itself. Either way, physical motion can provide a rush of good energy that can lift a mood and is a good way to keep healthy.

**Laugh Big**

Be it a slew of good jokes, a slapstick comedy or laughing yoga, find something to give you a good hearty laugh that brings tears to the eyes or a giggle fit that makes the sides of your body ache. People are 30 times more likely to laugh in groups than alone and, not surprisingly, laughter is associated with helping to develop person-to-person connections through a feedback loop characterized by laughter, social bonding and more laughter. Laughter, like so many other endorphin-triggers, helps to reduce certain stress hormones and, while it might be contagious, it strengthens your immune system rather than weakening it.

**Do Something Nice for Someone Else**

Hold a door open for someone at the bank, give someone directions if they look lost or make a point to compliment three people on your way to work. Small or big, directed at friends or strangers, random acts of kindness make the person performing the kind act happier when they're grouped together, according to Sonja Lyubomirsky, an experimental psychologist at UC Riverside. Doing a considerate thing for another person five times in one day made the doer happier than if they had spread out those five acts over one week. Lyubomirsky explains that because we all perform acts of kindness naturally, it seems to please us more when we're more conscious of it. There are social rewards, too, when people respond positively.

**Play the Part of an Optimist**

Optimism is a learned skill and there are a variety of ways to acquire it, says psychologist Mary Ann Troiani, co-author of *Spontaneous Optimism.* Through her research, Troiani has come up with three things that you can do to enhance your sense of optimism. First, straighten out your body before your emotions by keeping a straight body posture, taking big steps and walking quickly with your shoulders back and your head up. "People who are pessimistic walk slowly with small steps and their head down," she says. Second, change your tone of voice so that it is cheerful and full of energy. Third, use upbeat or happier words, such as "challenge" rather than "problem," or think of "opportunities" rather than "losses." "Positive thoughts and behavior have a positive impact on the brain's biochemistry," she says. "[They] boost your serotonin levels and signal that you're happy. Your brain will catch up to you." Troiani reminds us: it takes about 4 to 6 weeks to really change a habit.

**Tell Your Story to Someone**

Talking about the good and bad things that happen can lead to happiness — even if it is from opposite ends of the phone line. In a controlled lab experiment, psychologist Rich Walker of Winston-Salem State University found that the reasons are two-fold: people tend to emphasize positive emotions and mitigate negative ones when telling a story, since memory's natural bias is to keep tabs on the good stuff and gradually lose the emotional intensity of a bad event; and the process of storytelling can affect how one feels about what happened even up to a week later. In other words, talking about a negative experience made the emotional intensity of that memory fade faster than if the event had not been recounted. Walker says that storytelling works best when there is a lot of audience diversity — it helps to tell the story many times to a variety of people.

**Smile**

Go ahead. It won't hurt you. It might actually make you happier, too. Based on the psychology that a person feels whatever emotion they are acting at the moment, you will probably feel better if you smile. To avoid what is called cognitive dissonance, in which our thoughts and actions don't match up, our minds react to the change in our facial expression to bring our beliefs in line with our behavior. And, like laughter, it's contagious. If you smile, chances are that those around you will too.

# A Few More Simple Things You Can Do Today That Will Make You Happier, Backed By Science

**Huffington Post**

**By** [**Belle Beth Cooper**](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/belle-beth-cooper/)

**November 11, 2013**

**Sleep more - you'll be less sensitive to negative emotions**

We know that [sleep helps our bodies to recover from the day and repair themselves](http://blog.bufferapp.com/how-much-sleep-do-we-really-need-to-work-productively), and that it helps us focus and be more productive. It turns out, it's also important for our happiness.

In [*NutureShock*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0054U5ENY/ref=as_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=B0054U5ENY&linkCode=as2&tag=spacforrent-20), Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman explain how sleep affects our positivity:

Negative stimuli get processed by the amygdala; positive or neutral memories gets processed by the hippocampus. Sleep deprivation hits the hippocampus harder than the amygdala. The result is that sleep-deprived people fail to recall pleasant memories, yet recall gloomy memories just fine.

In one experiment by Walker, sleep-deprived college students tried to memorize a list of words. They could remember 81% of the words with a negative connotation, like "cancer." But they could remember only 31% of the words with a positive or neutral connotation, like "sunshine" or "basket."

The BPS Research Digest explores [another study](http://bps-research-digest.blogspot.com.au/2011/03/afternoon-nap-tunes-out-negative.html) that proves sleep affects our sensitivity to negative emotions. Using a facial recognition task over the course of a day, the researchers studied how sensitive participants were to positive and negative emotions. Those who worked through the afternoon without taking a nap became more sensitive late in the day to negative emotions like fear and anger.

**Go outside more - happiness is maximized at 13.9°C (57.2 F)**

In [*The Happiness Advantage*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0307591549/ref=as_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=spacforrent-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=0307591549), Shawn Achor recommends spending time in the fresh air to improve your happiness:

Making time to go outside on a nice day also delivers a huge advantage; one study found that spending 20 minutes outside in good weather not only boosted positive mood, but broadened thinking and improved working memory...

This is pretty good news for those of us who are worried about fitting new habits into our already-busy schedules. Twenty minutes is a short enough time to spend outside that you could fit it into your commute or even your lunch break.

A UK study from the [University of Sussex](http://www.thejournal.ie/sea-sun-happiness-study-973774-Jul2013/) also found that being outdoors made people happier:

Being outdoors, near the sea, on a warm, sunny weekend afternoon is the perfect spot for most. In fact, participants were found to be substantially happier outdoors in all natural environments than they were in urban environments.

The [American Meteorological Society](http://journals.ametsoc.org/doi/abs/10.1175/WCAS-D-11-00052.1?journalCode=wcas) published research in 2011 that found current temperature has a bigger effect on our happiness than variables like wind speed and humidity, or even the average temperature over the course of a day. It also found that **happiness is maximized at 13.9°C (57.2 F),** so keep an eye on the weather forecast before heading outside for your 20 minutes of fresh air.

**Plan more - have something to look forward to**

As opposed to actually taking a holiday, it seems that planning a vacation or just a break from the usual can improve our happiness. A study published in the journal, [Applied Research in Quality of Life](http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/02/18/how-vacations-affect-your-happiness/?_r=0) showed that the highest spike in happiness came during the planning stage of a vacation as the planners enjoyed the sense of anticipation:

In the study, the effect of vacation anticipation boosted happiness for eight weeks.

After the vacation, happiness quickly dropped back to baseline levels for most people.

**One study found that people who just thought about watching their favorite movie actually raised their endorphin levels by 27 percent.**

If you can't take the time for a vacation right now, or even a night out with friends, put something on the calendar--even if it's a month or a year down the road. Then whenever you need a boost of happiness, remind yourself about it.

## Dark Chocolate Almond Butter Cups

**Yield:** 12 to 14 mini cups

### Ingredients:

* 1/2 cup natural almond butter (homemade or store-bought)
* 2 tbsp pure maple syrup
* 1/2 tsp pure vanilla extract
* 1/4 tsp sea salt
* 7oz (195g) dark chocolate (at least 70% cacao)

### Directions:

1. In a small bowl, stir together the almond butter, maple syrup, vanilla extract and salt until smooth. Place in the freezer while you make the chocolate coating.
2. Finely chop the chocolate. Place it in a double boiler, or a pot of simmering water with a heat-proof bowl resting over top, making sure the water doesn't touch the bottom of the bowl. Heat over medium-low heat until chocolate is melted, stirring occasionally.
3. Place 12 mini cupcake liners in a mini cupcake tin. Spoon 1 teaspoon of melted chocolate into each liner. Tilt and twist each liner so the chocolate coats the sides of the liner (to about halfway up) and place back in the tin.
4. Take the almond butter filling from the freezer. Scoop out 1 teaspoon and gently roll it out into a ball between your palms. Place it in the centre of a chocolate-coated liner. Press the top down gently to flatten. Repeat with remaining filling.
5. Spoon another teaspoon of melted chocolate on top of each almond butter ball to cover completely. You may need to add a few drops more to get the chocolate to level above the almond butter ball. Top each cup with a few cacao nibs or flaked salt, if desired. Place the tin in the fridge to set.

Recipe adapted from [Sprouted Kitchen](http://staging.adashofcompassion.com/2013/03/dark-chocolate-almond-butter-cups/www.sproutedkitchen.com/home/2013/2/12/dark-chocolate-almond-butter-cups.html).

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