

Making Nice: How Giving and Gratitude Can Rebuild Connections and Break Down Barriers

November 30, 2020



At various points during the past year, many of us have lost our jobs and financial security. We've lost social interactions and the little freedoms we once took for granted. We've lost what made our days "normal." Most tragically, many of us have lost loved ones. The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a major toll on lives everywhere and, combined with the added combustion of reckonings over systemic racism and divisive politics, much of the world has been negatively impacted in one way or another. What can we do to feel better during these times? One answer appears to be "giving."

The act of giving can help those in need even as it improves the giver's own well-being.

"In giving to others, you might help them, but you might also help yourself."

Tristen Inagaki (San Diego State University)

"Giving social support to others can be beneficial for the person who is giving. In giving to others, you might help them, but you might also help yourself," according to psychological scientist Tristen Inagaki (San Diego State University).

Inagaki studies social connection and health, along with the neurobiological pathways linking the two. In a 2017 article published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, she and coauthor Edward Orehek (San Diego State University) explored the benefits of giving in nonmaterial ways, which she says are especially notable when providing care is an internally driven choice and is perceived as having a positive impact on the receiver.

"If I perceive the support to be given freely and to be effective at helping the other person, you're likely to see stronger effects of giving on [my] health outcomes," said Inagaki. "Whereas if I feel forced to give and that the support was ineffective in helping someone else, perhaps you wouldn't see the same health effects."

The pandemic has introduced important changes to the dynamics of giving. “On the one hand, the pandemic is a global situation that has put many people in need of support, whether financial, physical, or psychological. And so, there’s no shortage of need or opportunities to give,” Inagaki said. “On the other hand, it’s recommended that we remain physically separate from most of our social network and others in general,” even as we’re in near-constant close proximity to our children, extended family, and other housemates.

Close physical proximity appears to boost the associations between giving support and experiencing well-being. Citing recent findings, Inagaki noted that “giving to someone in your physical space is associated with better subjective health and less loneliness over time, but within the same giver, giving to those outside of the physical space is not.”

Getting High on Giving

One of the main benefits of giving appears to be the enhancement of well-being. Connecting two lines of Inagaki’s work, a possible pathway for this effect might be that giving and engaging in prosocial behaviors causes social connectedness to increase, which triggers the body opioid system leading to well-being.

“We’ve found that giving support to others increases feelings of social connection with that person compared to conditions in which you don’t give to the person,” said Inagaki. “There’s some older research in animals to suggest that giving behavior is opioid-mediated,” she added.

In a 2018 article published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Inagaki reviewed animal studies about the neurochemical mechanisms that mediate social connection and a theory suggesting that opioids are involved in feelings of being socially bonded in humans.

“Opioids affect social feelings, behaviors, and perceptions in both positive and negative social experiences,” explained Inagaki.

Social connection can cause an experience similar to that of taking opiates, with a cascade of neurochemical activity that increases our social well-being. On the contrary, when we experience social disconnection, our distress may increase. For example, some pharmacological studies suggested that naltrexone, a medication that inhibits opioid action, appears to reduce the feelings of warmth, pleasantness, and social connection that can be induced by holding a warm object.

Gifts With Benefits

Overall, Inagaki’s research indicates that engaging in prosocial behaviors such as taking care of others can boost health and well-being. Moreover, other research suggests that giving may increase prosocial behavior throughout our lives. This can have important social consequences, as prosocial behavior can promote health and education, as well as help fight social problems such as poverty and hunger.

“The experience of giving benefits may encourage prosocial behavior by increasing the salience and

strength of one's identity as a capable, caring contributor," wrote Adam Grant (University of Pennsylvania) and Jane Dutton (University of Michigan) in a 2012 article in *Psychological Science*.

For that study, Grant and Dutton asked university fundraisers to write journal entries for a week about recent experiences in which they had either received benefits *from* other people or given benefits *to* other people. The researchers found that those who wrote about their giving experiences increased their objective prosocial behavior, measured by time spent in voluntary calls to help the university in the 2 weeks following the writing exercise.

Grant and Dutton obtained the same pattern of results in a laboratory study. Using an online platform, they asked participants to list three ways in which they had recently given or received help. The month after completing the study, when participants went to the lab to pick up their payments, they also received a form describing the effects of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan. Asked whether they would like to donate to an earthquake relief initiative for the victims, participants were more likely to donate if they had reflected on giving help than if they had reflected on receiving help.

These findings suggest that "reflecting on giving, rather than receiving, can also lead to greater helpfulness," wrote Grant and Dutton.

Nor are the benefits of giving limited to prosocial behavior or well-being in general. For example, a counterintuitive solution to the feeling that one does not have enough time might be to give some of it away, wrote Cassie Mogilner (University of California, Los Angeles), Zoë Chance (Yale University), and APS Fellow Michael I. Norton (Harvard University) in another 2012 article in *Psychological Science*.

Mogilner and colleagues studied how to increase people's subjective sense of time. In four experiments, they compared the effects of spending time on other people with the effects of "wasting" time, spending time on oneself, and gaining free time. They found that spending time on others (e.g., helping an at-risk student or writing to a sick child) increased individuals' perceived spare time. The explanation for this effect appeared to be a boost in self-efficacy—that is, confidence in one's ability to execute behaviors that will achieve goals. Thus, "giving time makes people more willing to commit to future engagements despite their busy schedules," the researchers concluded.

"The experience of giving benefits may encourage prosocial behavior by increasing the salience and strength of one's identity as a capable, caring contributor."

Adam Grant (University of Pennsylvania) and Jane Dutton (University of Michigan)

Similarly, giving advice might have a larger impact on behavior than receiving advice. In a 2018 study in *Psychological Science*, Lauren Eskreis-Winkler (University of Pennsylvania), APS Fellow Ayelet Fishbach (University of Chicago), and APS Fellow Angela Duckworth (University of Pennsylvania) found that "struggling individuals were more motivated by giving advice than receiving it."

In one experiment, middle school students who gave advice to younger students ended up spending more time on their homework during the following month than students who received advice from expert teachers. In two other experiments, adults who struggled with saving money, controlling their

tempers, losing weight, or seeking employment either gave advice to others facing similar issues or received expert advice. Again, those who gave advice became more motivated to achieve their goals than those who received advice.

Other studies have shown that spending money on others (or simply recalling having done so) can be more satisfactory and can increase one's happiness more than spending money on oneself. This effect is so powerful that it appears to occur across countries, regardless of national wealth (Aknin et al., 2013).

Even young children can experience the benefits of giving. In one study, children under 2 years old who gave a treat to a puppet expressed more happiness than children who received a treat themselves (Aknin et al., 2012).

Performing acts of kindness also appears to increase people's psychological "flourishing"—positive emotions and positive psychological and social functioning (Nelson et al., 2016). This effect suggests that people striving for happiness may be more successful if they do things for others than if they treat themselves.

Finally, giving appears to have specific effects on physical responses to stress. Inagaki and APS Fellow Naomi Eisenberger (University of California, Los Angeles) showed in a 2016 article that individuals who wrote a supportive note to a friend experienced reduced sympathetic nervous system responses (systolic blood pressure and alpha-amylase) when they went on to face a stressful task, compared to individuals who had written about their route to school or work. These reduced sympathetic nervous system responses to stress might have beneficial effects for health outcomes such as decreasing blood pressure.

Giving in a Pandemic

COVID-19 has forced us to stay away from most people yet spend far more time than usual with our immediate families and housemates. These changes in the ways we engage with others influence our opportunities for giving and expressing gratitude. Many of our social interactions are done virtually, using online platforms that can prevent us from showing gratitude with a hug or giving social support by taking care of someone.

Whether there are negative effects from not giving remains an open question. "If we really want to give to people," Inagaki explained, "but we feel blocked from giving because of the pandemic, or because of other reasons, that would probably be bad for long-term health. As in, you know a family member or a friend is struggling, but you can't go to their house and give them a hug for years on end, that would certainly eat away at you over the long term."

Of course, she added, this is an extreme scenario, and there are other ways to give to people. Inagaki has explored specific pandemic-related behaviors and found that people who perform small acts of kindness, such as thanking an essential worker or donating time or money to a business in need, tend to experience less loneliness 3 months after than those who do not.

Engaging in simple, intentional positive activities, such as practicing kindness and expressing gratitude, has also been shown to increase our happiness. In a 2013 article published in *Current Directions in*

Psychological Science, APS Fellow Sonja Lyubomirsky (University of California, Riverside) and Kristin Layous (University of California, East Bay) described how positive activities increase well-being. That effect appears to depend on the features of positive activities (e.g., their frequency, intensity, and variety), the features of individuals (e.g., their motivation, effort, and personality), and the fit between the person and the activity.

Certain activities might generally increase people's well-being, but the "right person" engaging in the "right activity" might see bigger increases in positive emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, feel more satisfied, and, ultimately, experience greater well-being.

The Other Side of Giving: Gratitude

Can receiving support also strengthen social ties and well-being? Yes, when doing so leads people to experience and express gratitude, research finds.

But it is important to distinguish gratitude from related emotions such as happiness and feelings of indebtedness. In 2008, Michael McCullough, Marcia Kimeldorf, and Adam Cohen (University of Miami) explored the features that make gratitude different from other related emotions. They suggested that (a) people feel grateful when they have received costly, intentional, and voluntary benefits from a benefactor; (b) experiencing gratitude motivates beneficiaries to repay their benefactors and to extend generosity to third parties. In the same article, the researchers argued that gratitude may have played an adaptive role in human social evolution by promoting reciprocal altruism (i.e., the exchange of benefits among nonrelatives, with costs for the givers) and upstream reciprocity (i.e., a pay-it-forward-style distribution of benefits). Gratitude can thus be seen as a prosocial emotion that fosters altruism, which ultimately benefits the human species. In line with this idea, gratitude appears to occur in different cultures independent of language (McCullough et al., 2001).

But how does gratitude facilitate prosocial behavior? In a study published in 2006 in *Psychological Science*, Monica Y. Bartlett and APS Fellow David DeSteno (Northeastern University) found "that gratitude increases efforts to assist a benefactor even when such efforts are costly (i.e., hedonically negative), and that this increase differs from the effects of a general positive affective state." Moreover, gratitude can make people more likely to assist strangers. These findings, again, clearly differentiate gratitude from other positive emotions and even from a simple awareness of reciprocity norms (i.e., helping someone only because they helped us).

Bartlett and DeSteno concluded that they might "have identified one way in which gratitude fosters relationships: by encouraging individuals to accept short-term losses to reap longer-term rewards and, thereby, solve a 'commitment problem' central to social living."

In a more recent study, published in 2019, DeSteno, Fred Duong (Northeastern University), Daniel Lim (Pennsylvania State University), and Shanyu Kates (Northeastern University) explored a specific benefit of gratitude: preventing cheating. The researchers induced gratitude in some participants by having a researcher posing as another participant fix a fake computer crash for them; other participants watched happiness-inducing cute videos or emotionally neutral documentary videos. All participants were then

asked to report the results of a virtual coin flip that would indicate whether they would be assigned a short, fun task or a longer, difficult task, knowing that the next participant would be assigned the opposite task. Those who had been induced to feel gratitude were less likely to cheat than those who had been induced to feel happiness or no emotion.

“One way in which gratitude fosters relationships [is] by encouraging individuals to accept short-term losses to reap longer-term rewards and, thereby, solve a ‘commitment problem’ central to social living.”

Monica Y. Bartlett and David DeSteno (Northeastern University)

In another experiment, recalling a time when they had been grateful, in comparison to recalling a time when they had been happy or their typical day, also prevented participants from cheating in an effort to gain extra money.

DeSteno and colleagues’ findings suggest that inducing gratitude might work as an honesty nudge and that instilling a culture of gratitude might help to reduce cheating behaviors. Another benefit of expressing gratitude appears to be increasing the communal strength of relationships, as Nathalie M. Lambert (Florida State University) and colleagues reported in an article published in 2010 in *Psychological Science*.

In a communal relationship, an individual feels responsible for meeting the needs of the partner and gives benefits in response to the partner’s needs without expecting to get things in return. In one of Lambert and colleagues’ (2010) studies, participants expressed gratitude to a friend, thought grateful thoughts about a friend, thought about daily activities, or had positive interactions with a friend. Participants who had expressed gratitude reported more communal strength in their relationship than any of the other participants. Thus, expressing gratitude may be an easy way to strengthen relationships.

Despite the importance of expressing gratitude, Amit Kumar (University of Texas at Austin) and APS Fellow Nicholas Epley (University of Chicago) reported in a 2018 article in *Psychological Science* that individuals tend to undervalue the positive impact of their expression of gratitude. They asked participants to write and send letters of gratitude and to predict the recipients’ reaction: how surprised they would be, how positive their mood would be, how awkward they would feel, and how competent and warm they would perceive the letters to be. The researchers then surveyed the letter recipients on their reactions.

Results indicated that the letter writers underestimated the recipients’ surprise and positive mood and overestimated their feelings of awkwardness. Moreover, willingness to express gratitude was driven by expectations that it would create a positive mood and low awkwardness in the recipient—which means that misconceptions about the impact of showing gratitude might deter individuals from showing it. And this can have negative effects: The participants reported that they felt happier after sending the letters and recognized that they expressed gratitude less often than they would like.

“Underestimating the value of prosocial actions, such as expressing gratitude, may keep people from engaging in behavior that would maximize their own—and others’—well-being,” wrote Kumar and Epley.

How to Give and Show Gratitude

The clear benefits of giving and expressing gratitude—not only for the receiver but for the giver—and the impact of these actions on happiness, well-being, and prosocial behavior can be particularly important in stressful times like the ones we are living in.

Research Topic: Giving

To learn more about these studies and others on the mechanisms underlying our generous motivations and behaviors, [visit the Research Topic page](#).

Inagaki offered some advice about how to give gratitude, show gratitude, and, in general, practice kindness.

First, just do it—even during the pandemic, and especially during the pandemic.

“Maybe it feels like there are a lot of barriers, but we’re finding that even something as simple as expressing gratitude toward an essential worker—saying thank you to medical professionals or to sanitation workers or teachers or really anyone who is out there keeping the world moving—that doing that more is associated with better well-being over time during the pandemic,” Inagaki emphasized.

Second, give repeatedly.

“A number of theories in the social relationships literature suggest that repeated, positive social interactions—perhaps including giving to others—would keep you socially connected,” Inagaki said. “So, after you first dive in and give to someone, do it again the next day.”

References

- Aknin, L. B., Barrington-Leigh, C. P., Dunn, E. W., Helliwell, J. F., Burns, J., Biswas-Diener, R., Kemeza, I., Nyende, P., Ashton-James, C. E., & Norton, M. I. (2013). Prosocial spending and well-being: Cross-cultural evidence for a psychological universal. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 104(4), 635–652. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031578>
- Aknin, L. B., Hamlin, J. K., & Dunn, E. W. (2012). Giving leads to happiness in young children. *PLoS One*, 7(6), e39211. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0039211>
- Bartlett, M. Y., & DeSteno, D. (2006). Gratitude and prosocial behavior: Helping when it costs you. *Psychological Science*, 17(4), 319–325. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2006.01705.x>
- DeSteno, D., Duong, F., Lim, D., & Kates, S. (2019). The grateful don’t cheat: Gratitude as a fount of virtue. *Psychological Science*, 30(7), 979–988. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/jhs2c>
- Eskreis-Winkler, L., Fishbach, A., & Duckworth, A. L. (2018). Dear Abby: Should I give advice or

receive it? *Psychological Science*, 29(11), 1797–1806. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797618795472>

Grant, A., & Dutton, J. (2012). Beneficiary or benefactor: Are people more prosocial when they reflect on receiving or giving? *Psychological Science*, 23(9), 1033–1039. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612439424>

Inagaki, T. K. (2018). Opioids and social connection. *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 27(2), 85–90. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417735531>

Inagaki, T. K., & Orehek, E. (2017). On the benefits of giving social support: When, why, and how support providers gain by caring for others. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 26(2), 109–113. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721416686212>

Inagaki, T. K., & Eisenberger, N. I. (2016). Giving support to others reduces sympathetic nervous system-related responses to stress. *Psychophysiology*, 53(4), 427–435.

Kumar, A., & Epley, N. (2018). Undervaluing gratitude: Expressers misunderstand the consequences of showing appreciation. *Psychological Science*, 29(9), 1423–1435. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797618772506>

Lambert, N. M., Clark, M. S., Durtschi, J., Fincham, F. D., & Graham, S. M. (2010). Benefits of expressing gratitude: Expressing gratitude to a partner changes one's view of the relationship. *Psychological Science*, 21(4), 574–580. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797610364003>

Lyubomirsky, S., & Layous, K. (2013). How do simple positive activities increase well-being? *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22(1), 57–62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721412469809>

McCullough, M. E., Kilpatrick, S. D., Emmons, R. A., & Larson, D. B. (2001). Is gratitude a moral affect? *Psychological Bulletin*, 127(2), 249. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.127.2.249>

McCullough, M. E., Kimeldorf, M. B., & Cohen, A. D. (2008). An adaptation for altruism: The social causes, social effects, and social evolution of gratitude. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 17(4), 281–285. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2008.00590.x>

Mogilner, C., Chance, Z., & Norton, M. I. (2012). Giving time gives you time. *Psychological Science*, 23(10), 1233–1238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612442551>

Nelson, S. K., Layous, K., Cole, S. W., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2016). Do unto others or treat yourself? The effects of prosocial and self-focused behavior on psychological flourishing. *Emotion*, 16(6), 850–861. <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000178>