

Teaching: The Unexpected Pleasure of Doing Good

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Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching *Current Directions in Psychological Science* offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal [Current Directions in Psychological Science](#).

[Also see Teaching: On the Benefits of Critical Ignoring.](#)

[Aknin, L. B., Dunn, E. W., & Whillans, A. V. \(2022\). The Emotional Rewards of Prosocial Spending Are Robust and Replicable in Large Samples. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 31\(6\), 536–545.](#)

[Epley, N., Kumar, A., Dungan, J., & Echelbarger, M. \(2023\). A Prosociality Paradox: How Miscalibrated Social Cognition Creates a Misplaced Barrier to Prosocial Action. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 0\(0\).](#)

“Every human mind feels pleasure in doing good to another.”

Thomas Jefferson (1816)

Doing good feels surprisingly good. That's the bottom line of two new *Current Directions in Psychological Science* research summaries. In one, Lara Aknin, Elizabeth Dunn, and Ashley Whillans (2022) report "robust and replicable" evidence that *prosocial spending*—spending money on others—boosts happiness:

- People who are given cash become happier after spending it on others rather than themselves.
- People who receive a windfall allowing them to purchase steeply discounted goodies, such as chocolates, feel happier if the goodies go to a child in need rather than themselves.
- When surveyed, people worldwide report feeling happier after spending money on others rather than themselves (Aknin et al., 2013).

So, from child gift-givers (Aknin et al., 2015) to kidney donors (Brethel-Haurwitz & Marsh, 2014) to people spending on their pet rather than themselves (White et al., 2022), those who spend on others (at least for those who can afford it) feel an emotional lift. When we do good, we feel good.

In a second report, Nicholas Epley, Amit Kumar, James Dungan, and Margaret Echelbarger (in press), found that small prosocial actions can increase the well-being of both giver and receiver.

In one experiment, the Epley team had people strike up a friendly conversation with a stranger. When commuters were offered a \$5 gift card and assigned to (a) do as they would normally do on their train or bus, (b) sit in solitude, or (c) strike up a conversation with a stranger, the conversationalists' experience was surprisingly positive. They initially winced at the conversational challenge, anticipating an awkward experience. Yet, after conversing with a stranger, even introverts departed their commute in a happier mood.

[See all articles from this issue of the *Observer*.](#)

Other studies indicate a happiness boost from friendly bantering with a barista (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2013), giving a compliment to a stranger (Boothby & Bohns, 2021), or greeting a bus driver (Gunaydin, et al., 2021). Such small acts of kindness leave both giver and recipient feeling better.

Likewise, in 18 replications, Epley et al.'s students wrote letters sharing previously unexpressed gratitude to someone. The result? Most underestimated their recipients' surprise and delight. In further experiments, those performing random acts of kindness routinely underestimated their recipients' positive responses (Kumar & Epley, 2022).

If only we understood how positively people will respond to our kindness, we would more willingly express appreciation, offer a compliment, express support, or, as in the activity below, initiate deeper and more meaningful face-to-face conversations.

Thomas Jefferson rightly presumed that people "take pleasure in doing good to another." Yet, conclude Epley, Kumar, Dungan, and Echelbarger, "they may avoid this pleasure not because they do not want to be good to others, but because they underestimate just how positively others will react."

The take-home lesson: We and our students can do it: Greet the custodian with a smile. Take an interest in the ride-share driver. Ask the checkout clerk how their day is going. When feeling appreciation for a family member or friend, tell them. And see if we can replicate the happy science of micro friendships.

[Student Activities: The Unexpected Pleasure of Doing Good](#)

Experiencing the Pleasure of Connection and Kindness

To spark a class discussion, invite students to recall happy experiences of brief, humanizing interactions they've experienced with strangers—either as giver or as receiver. Can they recall spirit-lifting encounters with store clerks, tradespeople, taxi drivers, fellow hikers, teachers, or the like? Be prepared to enjoy some heartwarming stories.

Nicholas Epley and Amit Kumar also offer two activities that have provided powerful, memorable experiences for their students.

Activity 1: The happy experience of fast friendship

The gist: Following the lead of Kardas, Kumar, and Epley (2022), invite students to rate how awkward and how positive they would feel during a self-disclosing conversation with another student. Then pair them up with someone they don't know and, afterward, ask them to report on their experience. Most students overestimate the possible awkwardness of their upcoming conversation and underestimate its enjoyment, thus illustrating the psychological barrier that minimizes people's reaching out to people.

Step 1: Show students two questions (from Aron et al.'s, 1997 "fast friends" procedure).

1. If I were to become a good friend of yours, what would be most important for me to know about you?
2. For what in your life do you feel most grateful? Please tell me about it.

Ask them to rate, on a 10-point scale, (a) how awkward they anticipate feeling during this conversation, and (b) how enjoyable they expect the conversation to be.

Step 2: Pair each student with a classmate, giving them 10 to 15 minutes to converse about these two questions.

Step 3: Have them (perhaps using clicker or polling software) rate their actual experienced awkwardness and enjoyment.

"The gap between expectations and experience is consistently huge," reports Epley.

Activity 2: Gratitude email

Instruct students to think of someone—perhaps a fellow student, friend, teacher, coach, teammate, employer, spiritual mentor, or family member—who has been especially kind or helpful to you, but with whom you’ve not shared your gratitude. Write and send a gratitude email to this person describing why you are grateful. Specify what they did for you and how it affected you. Feel free to tell them that you are writing as part of a class assignment, but make sure they know that your gratitude is genuine.

Reflection: Ask students, immediately after sending the email, to answer three questions.

1. How surprised do you think the recipient will be to learn about the specific reasons for why you feel grateful to them?

Not at all surprised 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Extremely surprised

2. Compared to how they normally feel, how do you think they’ll indicate receiving this letter made them feel?

Much more negative than normal -5 -4 -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Much more positive than normal

3. Compared to how you normally feel, how do you feel after having sent this letter?

Much more negative than normal -5 -4 -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Much more positive than normal

In the next class, invite the students to report: How do they now feel about their taking the initiative to do this act of kindness. And how did the recipients respond: Were they surprised? pleased? (In their experiments, Kumar and Epley, 2018, reported that recipients responded even more positively than the gratitude givers expected. For more gratitude activities, see <https://ggia.berkeley.edu/#filters=gratitude>.)

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