

## The Unexpected Power of Random Acts of Kindness

By Catherine Pearson, The New York Times

Sept 19, 2022

New findings, published in the Journal of Experimental Psychology, corroborate just how powerful experiences such as Alexander's can be.

Researchers found that people who perform a random act of kindness tend to underestimate how much the recipient will appreciate it. And that miscalculation could hold many of us back from doing nice things for others more often.

"We have this negativity bias when it comes to social connection. We just don't think the positive impact of our behaviors is as positive as it is," said Marisa Franco, a psychologist and author of "Platonic: How the Science of Attachment Can Help You Make — and Keep — Friends," who did not work on the recent research.

"With a study like this," she said, "I hope it will inspire more people to actually commit random acts of kindness."

The power of kindness

The recent study comprised eight small experiments that varied in design and participants.

In one, for example, graduate students were asked to perform thoughtful acts of their own choosing, such as giving a classmate a ride home from campus, baking cookies or buying someone a cup of coffee.

In another, researchers recruited 84 participants on two cold weekends at the ice-skating rink at Maggie Daley Park in Chicago. They were given a hot chocolate from the snack kiosk and were told they could keep it or give it to a stranger as a deliberate act of kindness.

The 75 participants who gave away their hot chocolate were asked to guess how "big" the act of kindness would feel to the recipient on a scale from 0 (very small) to 10 (very large), and to predict how the recipient would rate their mood (ranging from much more negative than normal to much more positive than normal) upon receiving the drink.

The recipients were then asked to report how they actually felt using the same scales.

In that experiment — and across all others — the people doing the kind thing consistently underestimated how much it was actually appreciated, said one of the

study's authors, Amit Kumar, an assistant professor of marketing and psychology at the University of Texas at Austin.

“Not knowing one’s positive impact,” he said, “can stand in the way of people engaging in these sorts of acts of kindness in daily life.”

Another experiment in the study was devised to help researchers better understand this tendency to underestimate the power of our own kind acts.

In it, Kumar and his team recruited 200 participants in Maggie Daley Park. A control group of 50 participants received a cupcake simply for participating in the study and rated their mood. Another 50 people who did not receive a cupcake rated how they thought the receivers would feel after getting a cupcake.

A third group of 50 people were told they could give a cupcake away to strangers and were asked to rate their own mood as well as how they believed the recipients would feel.

Once again, the researchers found that those who got a cupcake as a result of a random act of kindness felt better than the person on the giving end thought they would.

Also, people who got a cupcake because of an act of kindness rated themselves higher on a happiness scale than those who got one simply for participating in the study, suggesting they got an emotional boost from the gesture, in addition to the cupcake itself.

‘We totally overthink it’

The notion that kindness can boost well-being is hardly new.

Studies have shown that pro-social behavior — basically, voluntarily helping others — can help lower people’s daily stress levels, and that simple acts of connection, such as texting a friend, mean more than many of us realize.

But researchers who study kindness and friendship say they hope the new findings strengthen the scientific case for making these types of gestures more often.

“I have found that kindness can be a really hard sell,” said Tara Cousineau, a clinical psychologist, meditation teacher and author of “The Kindness Cure: How The Science of Compassion Can Heal Your Heart and Your World.”

“People desire kindness yet often feel inconvenienced by the thought of being kind.”

Stress can also keep people from being kind to others, she said, as can the “little judgy voice” in people’s heads that causes them to question whether their gesture or gift will be misinterpreted, or whether it will make the recipient feel pressured to pay it back.

“When the kindness impulse arises,” Cousineau said, “we totally overthink it.”

Kindness begets kindness

An act of kindness is unlikely to backfire, she said, and in some instances, it can beget even more kindness.