

Altruism, Health, and Happiness

by

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Performing acts of kindness benefits individuals performing the act as well as recipients. Giving with unselfish motives increases mental health in the giver as well as the receiver. Living a selfless life fosters not only essential connections with others but also a direct connection with one's true self. Ultimately, connecting with others and engaging in altruistic behaviors is principal to inner contentment.

Altruism and the Social Brain

Mirror neurons wire our brains for connection to others and allow us to experience the same emotions as a person taking part in an action we are viewing. Have you ever wondered why we cry in sad movies or get anxious in action films? It is because we take on the emotions of those on screen through the activation of our mirror neurons. Mirror neurons are the foundation for the empathizing process and, therefore, indicate that we are all fundamentally connected.

Altruism is defined as practicing concern for others--selflessness. Altruism is linked to personal well-being through facilitating higher self-acceptance, self-worth, self-esteem, and life satisfaction, as well as increasing positive emotions and possessing healthier relationships. Altruism is a factor that adds meaning to our lives, and having meaning or purpose in life is foundational to our happiness. Martin Luther King said, "Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness."

From an evolutionary perspective, altruism leading to cooperation was necessary to survive and thrive. Researchers define this as “prosocial” behavior. An important aspect of such behavior is prosocial spending, which is defined as one’s money spent on other people. This definition encompasses all forms of charity as well as simple acts of kindness like buying coffee for a friend. Studies have continuously found that prosocial spending increases one’s wellbeing, thus affirming the value of altruism. Due to the finding that prosocial spending has been proven beneficial across cultures, perhaps altruistic acts can be utilized as a new form of currency.

Altruism for Mental and Physical Well-being

Retirees older than 65 who volunteer for causes that help others have fewer symptoms of depression, anxiety, and experience less somatization, or the conversion of psychological distress into medical symptoms. Volunteers also score higher in life satisfaction and the desire to live. A key finding is that helping others often leads to better mental health in the givers rather than in those receiving it. In other words, altruism may be even more beneficial to the giver than to the receiver in terms of mental health

The physical benefits of engaging in helping behavior include enhanced physical well-being due to diminished release of cortisol, which is our stress hormone. Individuals engaging in helping behaviors also live longer lives--one research study showed that volunteerism resulted in a 44% reduction in mortality among individuals who volunteered in two or more helping organizations. Even more surprising is that high volunteerism has been shown to result in a greater reduction in mortality than exercise frequency, physical mobility and attendance at religious services.

Smoking cessation was only *slightly* higher in reducing mortality rates than was volunteerism! Through research, it is clear that altruism is necessary for both mental and physical health. Altruism provides meaning to our lives and allows us to establish connections we are wired for. Indeed, altruism is necessary for individual and global happiness.

Altruism in Religion

The importance of giving back is engrained in many, if not all, our major religions. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, for example, agree on the necessity of giving and helping others in order for happiness to be experienced and shared.

Judaism is built on the ideal of *Tikkun Olam*, or the necessity to heal and repair the earth. Happiness for the Jewish people is rooted in “*doing well and living well*,” which, according to Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister, includes the necessity to help others and embrace the pursuit of happiness for all. Altruism, is of course, promoted and found deep within Christianity as a reflection of Jesus Christ who always helped the less fortunate and gave whenever an opportunity presented itself. Islam is based on a complementary ideal with one of its five pillars being Alms-giving or *zakat*. Thus, giving back also acts as a guide for Muslims to achieve spiritual fulfillment.

Practicing altruism in religions serves a prosocial cause and it is also a necessity for individual fulfillment. No matter the destination, whether it be finding salvation, happiness, or the Divine, it can be reached via helping others. Therefore, altruism is a key element in our major religions--acting as a guide for individual, as well as communal, happiness.

Conclusion

Our prosocial nature encourages altruistic behavior for relationships to form and for society to survive and succeed. Giving back and helping others provides meaning to our lives--a sense that we are serving a larger purpose. According to psychiatrist and author, Viktor Frankl, finding meaning in life is accomplished through doing good deeds. The deepest meaning of life is discovered through our connections to others and our willingness to be selfless. Indeed, research indicates that prosocial actions benefit the individuals performing these deeds as much as the recipients--perhaps even more so. Surely, then, universal happiness can be accomplished through kindness.