

A LINE ON LIFE

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Altruism and the Holiday Spirit *

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In the middle of the holiday season, people seem friendlier and are more likely to help one another. Many of us have often asked, "*Why can't things be this way all year around? Why is this 'doing good for others' restricted mainly to the Christmas season?*"

First we have to define exactly what we are discussing. Helping others is only one type of **prosocial behavior**. However, seasonal helping is more specific. First, it typically does *not* involve an emergency. There is no raging storm, fire or flood. Second, there is typically no external reward involved. The person will probably not get any financial reward, a medal or be helped in return. Essentially, we are talking about **altruism** – the voluntary, intentional act of helping others at some cost to oneself (time, effort or money) with no expectation of any external reward.

Altruistic behavior needs at least three requirements before it can occur. First, we need to perceive that help is needed. Second, we need to feel some social responsibility to help. Lastly, we need to believe that we are capable of providing help.

Many people believe that rural areas have more altruism than big cities. Although some psychological studies support this view, others find no difference. A 1975 study in the Netherlands found a possible reason for these conflicting results. The investigators found no difference in the helpfulness of people in large cities and small towns. However, they did find that when the stimulus input was high (noisy, crowded streets), people were less helpful in *both* urban and rural areas. With more complex and noisier surroundings, people are less likely to notice someone in need of help. This is a possible reason for the differences in urban-rural altruism. (Of course, the fear of vulnerability to crime also leads to less altruism in urban areas.)

Social norms also influence altruism. Among these norms, **social responsibility** – the obligation to help others that depend on us regardless of their ability to reciprocate – seems to be especially strong during the holiday season. Another norm is closely related to this – the **equity** norm or the norm of **distributive justice**. This norm has two parts. First, people should be rewarded according to their efforts or contributions. Second, people who receive less than they deserve should be assisted.

A third norm also relates to helping – the norm of **reciprocity**. This is believed to be a *universal* norm – it is found in all known societies. People should help those who have helped them. (At the very least, people should not harm those who have helped them.) Some sociologists believe that this norm forms the basis for all cooperative behaviors. Its essence can be captured by modifying the Golden Rule slightly, "*Do good for others who have done good for you.*"

However, sometimes the obligation created by the reciprocity norm can lead to negative feelings toward the helper. If the recipient perceives the helper as having an ulterior motive – whether this is actually true or not – the recipient will tend to view the helper negatively. Recipients could also feel obligated to return the favor but believe that they are incapable of doing so. This fosters less self-esteem in the recipients and greater negative feelings toward the helper for putting them in this position. If recipients of help feel obligated toward the helper, there is a way they can reduce this feeling. Essentially, the helper can promote a concept similar to a chain letter. (This method was the theme of a recent film called *Pay It Forward*.)

"You do not need to repay the help you have received. If you feel obligated, you can fulfill your obligation by helping someone else in the future. Somewhere, sometime in the future, take a little extra time and effort to help a person in need. If they feel obligated to you in turn, offer them the same option. Thus a chain of altruism will be started."

Possibly the chain could work itself back to the original helper or someone the helper loves.

One of the most consistent findings is that altruism is increased by being in a positive mood. If you succeed at something, receive an unexpected gift, or merely think about a happy event – this leads to increased altruistic behavior. Since a positive mood is fostered by the holiday season, it is probably one of the primary reasons for the seasonal aspect of altruism. (Possibly receiving the bills in January for December's altruism spoils the positive mood and reduces the altruism.)

If we want altruistic behavior to continue all year long, we need to rely less on these seasonal factors. What type of person is more likely to be altruistic? What type of recipient is most likely to be helped? How can we train young children to be more altruistic? (Remember, we are only talking about *non-emergency* situations.)

One personality characteristic of helpers is **empathy** – the ability to put yourself in "*another's shoes*" to feel what the other person feels. This relates to the first requirement for helping – **perceiving the needs of others**. Perceiving the need does not guarantee helping, but the lack of this perception almost guarantees that no help will be given.

Altruistic people have developed prosocial motivation. They have developed a strong sense of **social responsibility** toward others. This is the second requirement for helping. Those with **high self-esteem** are also more likely to help. In terms of the third requirement for helping, high esteem people feel **capable** of helping.

Are men or women more altruistic? Some psychological studies indicate no differences, while others favor one gender or the other. **Social roles** – specifically **gender roles** – may account for this variation. In our culture, the gender role for women emphasizes helping others. Therefore, women tend to show more social responsibility. However, the gender

role for men emphasizes achievement. Therefore, they would be more capable of helping in some situations. Since both social responsibility and capability are needed, which gender helps the most may depend on specific situational factors.

One situational factor that effects both sexes equally is **time**. Those who are pressed for time are less altruistic than those who are not. In one psychological study, on the way to an appointment, seminary students passed a slumped, unmoving figure who was coughing and groaning. Of the seminary students who were late, only 10% stopped to help. This was in contrast to the helping behavior of 63% of the seminary students who had more time. It is very likely that the stress of being late kept the seminary students from perceiving the person in need.

Who is more likely to be helped? Psychological studies indicate that tend to help **people like us** – the same socioeconomic group, the same race, religion and nationality, those who wear similar clothes and have similar lifestyles. However, in most situations, women are more likely to be helped than men are. Again, this may be related to gender roles – dependency is more acceptable for women than men.

In addition, those who are more **attractive** are more likely to be helped. Some may see this related to gender differences mentioned above. However, a 1976 psychological study contradicted this. Copies of completed graduate school application forms were "lost" in a large metropolitan airport. All forms included a photo in a stamped, self-addressed envelope. The photos differed as to sex, race and attractiveness. Over 600 people found the "lost" envelopes. Regardless of the race or sex in the photo, physically attractive people were helped more often – their forms were mailed – than those who were less attractive.

Our altruistic behavior can become an example for others to follow.

How can we develop more altruism in our children? One of the main ways of fostering altruism is **modeling** it. Although telling children to help others or share does help a little, it helps much more if the parents demonstrate the behavior they advocate. Essentially, it is a case of "*practice what you preach.*"

Second, the child's altruistic behavior needs to be **positively reinforced**. Rather than using material goods, smiles, hugs and comments like, "It was really nice of you to do that," are effective reinforcers. To some reinforcing altruistic behavior seems like a contradiction. How can it be altruistic, if you are reinforcing it? Initially, the norms of social responsibility and reciprocity need to be reinforced. After sufficient modeling and reinforcement, the social norms will become **internalized** by children. This means that the norms will now be viewed as their own feelings. Only then will the behavior be altruistic. Instead of external rewards, children will receive intrinsic **self-rewards** for

altruistic behavior. It is this internal feeling of self-satisfaction, self-esteem and pleasure that keeps the altruism going.

You can increase your altruistic behavior. Not only will you feel better about yourself – you will be modeling altruism for others.

Due to lack of opportunity or capability, some of us will not be able to be altruistic in some situations – making donations to charities, helping a stranded motorist, giving blood, or helping someone move heavy objects. Even so, all of us can perform other altruistic behaviors – giving a friendly greeting to those we encounter, spending a little more time with someone who is lonely, giving directions to someone who is lost, praising the positive qualities of others. If we increase our altruistic behavior even a little bit, not only will it help others, we will be happier too!