

A LINE ON LIFE

2/23/97

Getting Others in the Mood to Help *

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We often describe some people as being helpful and others as not helpful. We tend to think of **helpfulness** as a personal trait that some people have and others don't. Rather than just a fixed characteristic in someone's personality, helpfulness is also determined by factors in the *situation*.

In 1972, this was dramatically revealed by psychologists Isen and Levin. In their classic study, one of the experimenters went to a telephone booth and pretended to make a phone call. He acted as if the call did not go through, hung up and left the booth. Sometimes he left a dime in the coin return, and sometimes he took it. (Remember when phone calls were only a dime?)

Nearby, a woman confederate waited, holding a folder full of papers. She seemed to be windowshopping. Actually, she was waiting for the next person to use the phone. That person could be either a man or a woman. However, the callers could only be used as subjects, if they were alone and not carrying anything. As each caller left the booth, the woman confederate approached. When she was in the caller's path, she "accidentally" dropped her papers.

Would the subjects stop to help the woman pick up her papers? Would the small situational factor of finding a dime in the phone booth make a difference?

When no dime had been found, none of the women and less than 10% of the men stopped to pick up the papers. Helping behavior changed drastically, when the subjects found a dime in the telephone booth. *All* the women and 75% of the men stopped to help pick up the papers.

This indicated that even a small difference in the situation leads to a large change in helping behavior. Later studies also indicated that, if you are in a "*good mood*," you are more likely to engage in helping behavior. Unexpectedly finding money – even if it is a small amount – seems to improve our mood.



Even so, situational factors *interact* with personality traits. This is why some situational factors will work with some people and not others. In a 1986 study, psychologists Romer, Gruder and Lizardo sought confirm this. They gave a large number of college students a personality test. From the test results, students were classified into three personality "*types*." Some were **altruistic** – they were helpful with no expectation for any positive return for their help. **Receptive-giving**

people were also helpful, but typically because they expected some type of reward. The third category – **selfish** – consisted of students who were interested in receiving help but not giving help to others.

A month after testing, another experimenter called up the subjects and asked for their help. As a graduate student, she had to complete her research project by the end of the semester. Some subjects were offered course credit for participation, while others were not. Would the students help out the graduate student by volunteering for the experiment? Participation varied, depending on both the personalities and the situations.

With or without course credit, only about one-third of *selfish* students volunteered. The reward did not make a difference. In contrast, about 44% of *receptive-giving* students volunteered without course credit.

When offered course credit, the proportion of volunteers doubled. They were positively influenced by the offer of a reward.

The *altruistic* students reacted in an opposite way. When a reward was not offered, almost 80% volunteered. With the promise of a reward, only about half volunteered. They were much less likely to help when a reward was offered. Not only did situational factors affect helping behavior, but the effects differed, depending on the personality traits of the subjects.

Getting others to be helpful starts with us.

Most of us would like a world in which people are more helpful. When people are in a good mood, they are more likely to help. Your behavior can get others in a good mood. This doesn't mean that you need to run around putting quarters into phone booths. (Remember, the price has increased.)

Any respectful act can improve another person's mood. It doesn't have to take much effort.

- When traffic is heavy, you can pause for a short while to let a motorist move from a driveway into the flow of traffic.
- When entering or leaving a building, hold a door open for someone else, especially if they are carrying packages.
- When others have done something well, be sure to compliment them.

The list is endless. Most of these acts can be categorized as "*good manners*."

However, don't expect immediate results. Other situation factors beside your good deed may be affecting the behavior of others. Beside, the personality traits of individuals interact with the situational factors.

If you are *altruistic*, you probably have been doing this already – for the sheer joy of aiding others. With *receptive-giving* people, it might encourage you, if you realize that these courtesies may lead others to reciprocate by helping you. However, if you are one of the *selfish* ones, well... have a nice day anyway.

* Adapted from Benjamin B. Lahey's *Psychology: An Introduction*, Brown and Benchmark Publishers, 1995, pages 487-488.