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The Science of a Meaningful Life: Feeling Good by Doing Good

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<http://greatergood.berkeley.edu>

The Greater Good Science Center

Resources for a compassionate and resilient society

Online Magazine: Award-winning articles, blogs for parents and educators, videos, podcasts, and more at **GREATERGOOD.BERKELEY.EDU**

Events & Workshops: “The Science of Happiness” free online course, March 14 Rick Hanson workshop, Summer Institute for Educators

Science: Research fellowships, Gratitude project

Books: *Born To Be Good, The Compassionate Instinct*

The Science of a Meaningful Life

The Greater Good Science Center studies the psychology, sociology, and neuroscience of well-being, and teaches skills that foster a thriving, resilient, and compassionate society.

Why do we need a science of the
greater good? (aka “the science of a
meaningful life”)



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World GDP Levels

1. United States
2. China
3. Japan
4. Germany
5. France
6. United Kingdom
7. Brazil
8. Russian Federation
9. Italy

Source: World Bank Report, 2013

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Source: World Bank Report, 2013

World Happiness Levels

1. Denmark
2. Norway
3. Switzerland
4. Netherlands
5. Sweden
-
16. Mexico
17. United States
18. Ireland

Source: UN World Happiness Report, 2013

Why a science of the greater good?

(Why isn't our happiness keeping pace with our wealth?)

Hedonic Adaptation (aka “the hedonic treadmill”)



Why do we need a science of the greater good? Why isn't our happiness keeping pace with our wealth?

Loneliness

- Americans have 1/3 fewer close friends than they did a generation ago
- 25 percent say they have no close friends at all—more than twice as many as two decades ago
- More live alone or with just one other person



Why do we need a science of the greater good? Why isn't our happiness keeping pace with our wealth?

Loneliness is linked to...

- lower happiness
- less resilience to stress
- lack of sleep
- worse health (eg, higher blood pressure, weaker immune systems)



Why do we need a science of the greater good? Why isn't our happiness keeping pace with our wealth?

Narcissism

- 30 percent increase among students from early 1980s to mid-2000s
- Rise in related traits like materialism and self-esteem
- Corresponding reductions in levels of empathy and concern for others: less empathic concern and perspective taking in 2009 vs. 1979



High narcissism/low empathy hinders social connection, kindness and compassion—the stuff of the greater good

Why do we need a science of the greater good? Why isn't our happiness keeping pace with our wealth?



Inequality

- 1979-2007: Income of top 1% grew by 278% vs. 35% for middle 20%
- CEOs now earns 110x more than workers (vs 30x in '79)
- 2012 Pew Survey: Inequality now greatest source of social conflict in US

Why do we need a science of the greater good? Why isn't our happiness keeping pace with our wealth?



Inequality

- Harms the health & happiness of low SES
- AND in high SES people, hinders all the skills that motivate them to contribute to the greater good: empathy, compassion, altruism, desire to connect
- These are also the skills essential to happiness
- Helps explain why happiness plateaus at \$70K: Even if money could buy happiness, its effects are offset

So what can we do about any of this?

So what can we do about any of this?

That's where we come in.



The Happiness-Altruism Loop

The Happiness-Altruism Loop

Left side of the room: Close your eyes

The Happiness-Altruism Loop

Left side of the room: Close your eyes

Remember a time you spent \$50 on yourself

The Happiness-Altruism Loop

Left side of the room: Close your eyes

Remember a time you spent \$20 on yourself

Right side of the room: Close your eyes

Remember a time you spent \$20 on *someone else*

The Happiness-Altruism Loop

Left side of the room: Close your eyes

Remember a time you spent \$20 on yourself

Right side of the room: Close your eyes

Remember a time you spent \$20 on *someone else*

WHO FEELS HAPPIER?

The Happiness-Altruism Loop

Research suggests the **right side** of the room feels happier.

AND the happier they feel, the more likely they are to behave altruistically in the future.

Source: Aknin, Dunn & Norton (2011). The Journal of Happiness Studies (there *is* such a thing!). And other sources.

The Happiness-Altruism Loop

Why does this loop exist?

The Happiness-Altruism Loop

Why does this loop exist?

We are wired to care.

Care and compassion are
adaptive behaviors--keys
to our survival.



Wired to Care: Altruism & Health

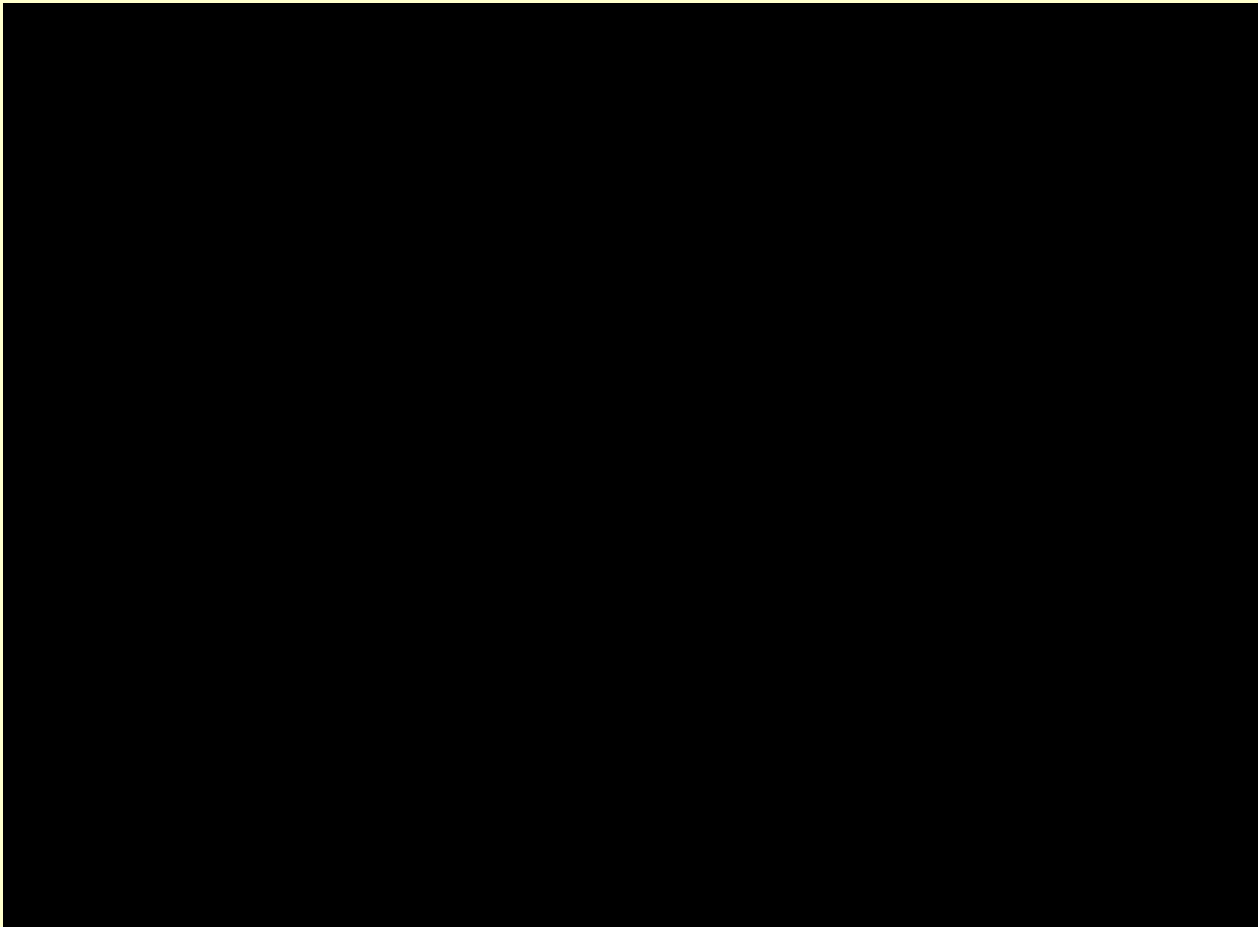
- Giving to charity activates pleasure brain regions, endorphins (“helper’s high”) (Moll et al, 2006; Harbauch & Mayr, 2007)
- People who help others more: more resilient to stress, less likely to die (Poulin et al, 2013)
- Heart disease: helping others protects twice as much as aspirin
- People who live life with “something to contribute to society” have stronger immune response profile (Fredrickson et al, 2013)

Wired to Care: Altruism & Health

- 55 & Up: volunteering for 2 or more charities reduces overall likelihood of death by 44% (Oman et al, 1999)
- 50% report feeling stronger and more energetic after helping others (ibid)
- Stronger effect than exercising 4x/week or going to church!
- Controlled for physical health, exercise, gender, smoking and other lifestyle habits, marital status, and more...

Wired to Care: Altruism & Kids

- Kids as young as 18 months old spontaneously help
(Warneken & Tomasello, 2006)



Wired to Care: Altruism & Kids

A little priming goes a long way...



Wired to Care: Altruism & Kids

A little priming goes a long way...

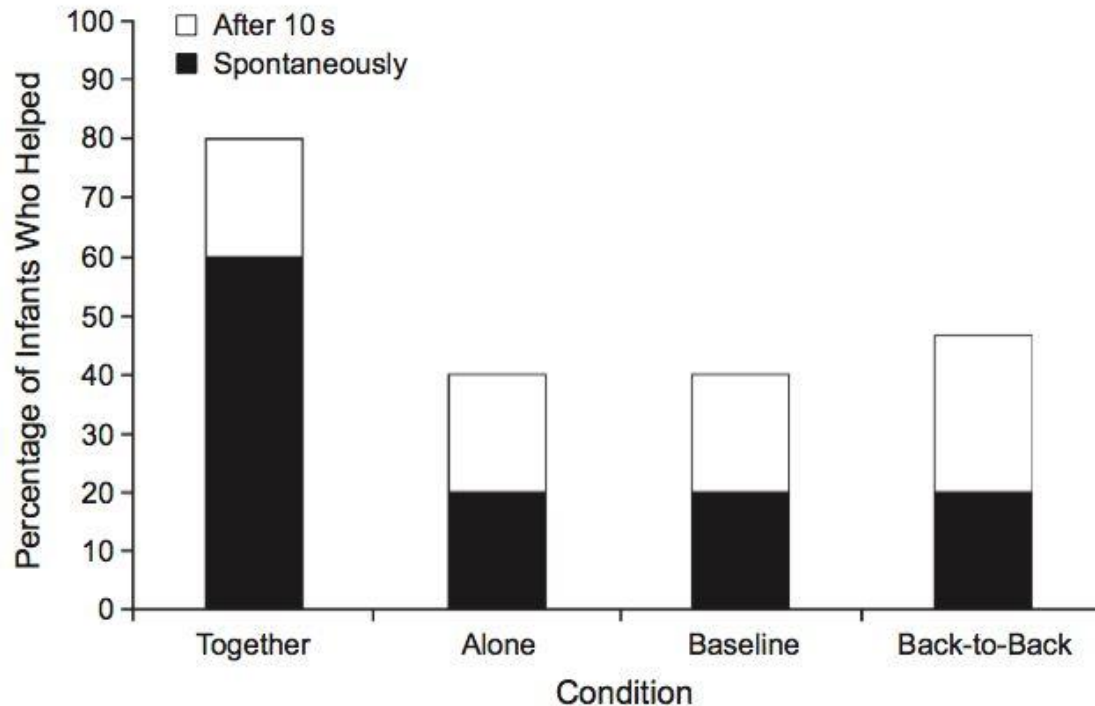
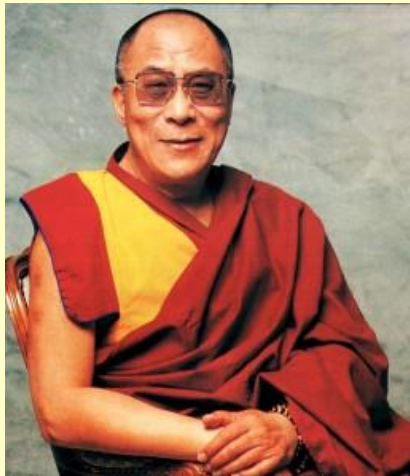


Fig. 2. Percentage of infants who helped the experimenter spontaneously (i.e., during the first 10 s) and during the rest of the test phase (i.e., including after prompting) in each of the four conditions.

So what can you do?

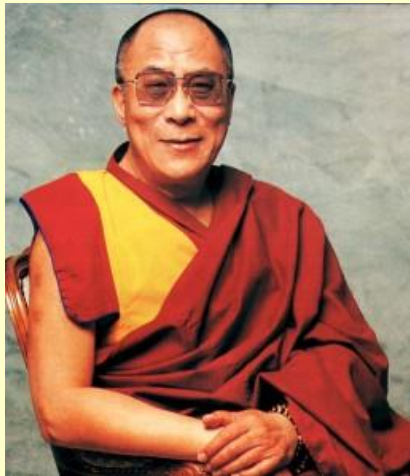
Kindness fosters happiness...



The Dalai Lama: “If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.”

So what can you do?

Kindness fosters happiness...



The Dalai Lama: “If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.”

Happiness Practice #1: Random Acts of Kindness

So what can you do?

... and happiness fosters kindness.

Happiness Practice #2: Three Good Things

So what can you do?

... and happiness fosters kindness.

Happiness Practice #2: Three Good Things

1. Write down something good that happened to you today.

So what can you do?

... and happiness fosters kindness.

Happiness Practice #2: Three Good Things

1. Write down something good that happened to you today.
2. Explain how it made you feel.

So what can you do?

... and happiness fosters kindness.

Happiness Practice #2: Three Good Things

1. Write down something good that happened to you today.
2. Explain how it made you feel.
3. Describe *why* you think it happened.

So what can you do?

... and happiness fosters kindness.

Happiness Practice #2: Three Good Things



So what can you do?

... and happiness fosters kindness.

Happiness Practice #2: Three Good Things



So what can you do?

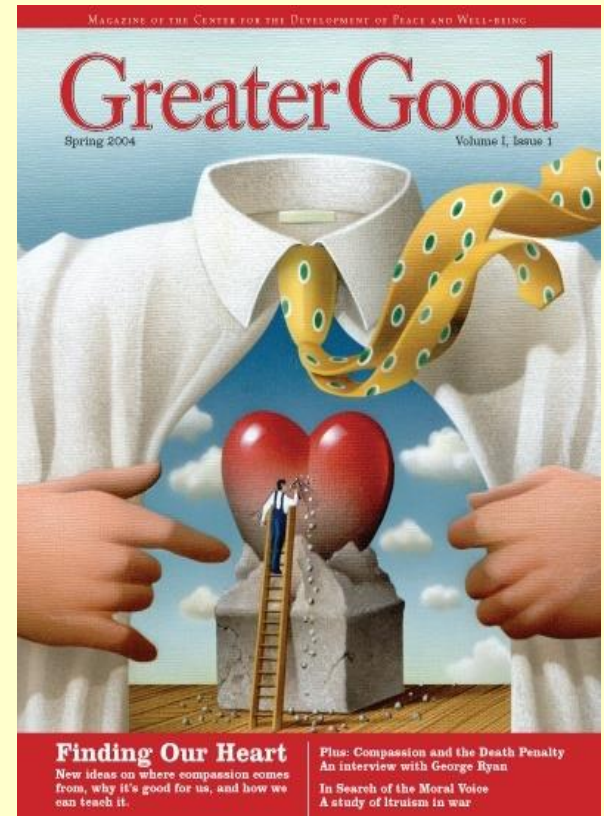
... and happiness fosters kindness.

Happiness and kindness are **contagious**.



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Be a Part of Greater Good Science!

Berkeley Friendship, Emotion, and Wellness Study

Led by Iris Mauss, Ph.D., UC Berkeley Psychology Dept.

- Looking for female friend pairs between 25 and 77 yrs old
- Study is exploring: How can people best cope with life's challenges? How do friendships contribute to our health?
- Pays \$230 for your participation

For more information, visit

<http://eerlab.berkeley.edu/befriend/>

OR

Call/text 725-22B-WELL (725-222-9355)

THANK YOU!!!



<http://greatergood.berkeley.edu>