

10 Science-Based Reasons Why Compassion is Hot!

19Jul

Science suggests that compassion may well be the most important thing in your life.

1. It makes us happy (as happy as getting money)!

A [brain-imaging study](#) headed by neuroscientist Jordan Grafman from the National Institute of Health showed that the “pleasures centers” in the brain, i.e. the parts of our brains that are active when we experience pleasure (like dessert, money, sex) are equally active when we observe someone giving money to charity as when we receive money ourselves!

2. In fact, it makes us happier than buying things for ourselves.

Giving to others increases well-being above and beyond spending money on ourselves! In a revealing [experiment](#) published in Science by Harvard Business School professor Michael Norton, participants received a sum of money. Half of the participants were instructed to spend the money on themselves and the other half were told to spend the money on others. At the end of the study, participants that had spent money on others felt significantly happier than those that had spent money on themselves. This is true even for infants!

A [recent study](#) by Elizabeth Dunn and colleagues at the University of British Columbia shows that, even in children as young as 2, giving treats to others increases their happiness more than receiving treats themselves.

3. It makes us attractive.

Marketing companies may try to tell us that the secret to finding our soulmate lies in anti-wrinkle chemical peels or muscle-inflating protein powders. However, both men and women agree that a major secret to attractiveness is a [kind heart](#). In a study on dating preferences, researchers found that one trait both genders agreed was important in potential partners kindness.

4. It uplifts everyone around us.

Why are the lives of people like Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, and Desmond Tutu so inspiring? Research by Jonathan Haidt at the University of Virginia suggests that seeing someone helping another person creates a state of “elevation.” Have you ever been moved to tears by seeing someone’s loving and compassionate behavior? Haidt’s data suggests that it may be this elevation that then inspires us to help others — and it may just be the force behind a chain reaction of giving.

5. It spreads like wildfire.

Social scientists James Fowler of UC San Diego and Nicolas Christakis of Harvard [demonstrated](#) that helping is contagious — acts of generosity and kindness beget more generosity in a chain reaction of goodness. You may have seen one of the news reports about chain reactions that occur when someone pays for the coffee of the

drivers behind them at a drive-through restaurant or at a highway tollbooth. People keep the generous behavior going for hours. Try this at home.

6. It boosts our health and longevity.

Helping others may lead to health, longevity and happiness. University of Michigan researcher Stephanie Brown, in a study of over 400 elderly people, found that those who helped others more were healthier, happier and lived longer than others. Of course, one reason for these findings may be that people who are healthier have more opportunity to be of help to others. However, data indicates that positive emotions and social connections (both a consequence of helping others) have a positive and protective effect on health that may explain these findings. For example, a study by Sheldon Cohen at Carnegie Mellon University showed that people with more social connections have higher immune function and are less likely to get sick. Another **large-scale study** showed that the opposite of compassion — i.e., not feeling connected to others — is as dangerous for our health as smoking, high blood pressure, obesity, and lack of exercise.

7. It gets us out of a funk.

Think of a time you were feeling blue and suddenly a close friend or relative called you for urgent help with a problem. All of a sudden your attention was on helping them. Rather than feeling blue, you began to feel energized and before you knew it, you felt great! Research shows that depression and anxiety are linked to a state of self-focus, a preoccupation with “me, myself, and I.” When you do something for someone else, however, that state of self-focus immediately dissolves.

8. It’s the most natural thing.

One reason why compassion might feel so good is that it’s natural to us. Though economists and grumps may ba-humbug, many spiritual traditions teach us that, at our core, we are loving, generous, and kind. Research with infants backs up these claims. Michael Tomasello and other scientists at the Max Planck Institute have **found** that infants automatically engage in helpful behavior. Dale Miller at the Stanford Business School shows that adults, too, are also automatically driven to help others. The difference between children and adults is that adults will often stop themselves because they worry that others think they are self-interested.

9. It gives us more time.

With hectic modern-day schedules, we are all running out of one basic commodity: time! A recent study, however, suggests that helping others actually helps us feel like we have more time. A recent study by **Cassie Mogilner** of the Wharton Business School examined the impact of wasting time, spending time on oneself, gaining “free” time, and spending time on others. Mogilner and her colleagues found that spending time on others increased participants’ subjective sense of having more time — yet another way in which giving makes us feel better.

10. It’s good for the environment.

No scientific evidence needed here. Being kind, caring and empathetic to your friends, colleagues, neighbors and strangers on the street just makes sense. It’s not only good for you, it’s good for our society, community, and the world around us. And since it’s contagious, why not spread it far and wide?