

ELICITING ALTRUISM

Difficulty: **MODERATE** | Frequency: **1X/MONTH** | Duration: **VARIABLE**



WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Research suggests that humans have a strong propensity for kindness and generosity, and that kindness improves the health and happiness of the giver, not only of the receiver. We'll often be kind to others even at a cost or risk to ourselves—the definition of altruism. But we don't always act on our altruistic instincts—barriers can get in the way.

Fortunately, studies have also identified ways to overcome these barriers to altruism. Here we outline three research-based strategies for eliciting altruism from yourself or others.

TIME REQUIRED

How long this practice takes you will vary depending on which strategy you choose, but make it a goal to follow one of these strategies at least once a month.

HOW TO DO IT

Below are three different strategies that are effective at encouraging kindness and generosity. You can try them individually or in combination with one another. Click on the link at the end of each strategy for more detailed instructions on how to perform it.

There are many different creative ways that you can put these principles into practice. We encourage you to share your experience with them in the Comments & Reviews section below.

1. **Create reminders of connectedness.** Research suggests that when people are reminded of human connection, they behave more altruistically, even when those reminders of connection are very subtle. Something as simple as a quote evoking shared goals, words like “community,” or a picture conveying warmth or friendships—they can all have an impact. Take a moment to look around your home, office, or classroom and consider how you could add words, images, or objects that communicate connection. For more on this technique, see the [Reminders of Connectedness](#) practice.
2. **Put a human face on a problem.** Research shows that humans are more likely to want to help others if they see them as individuals, not just abstract statistics. To motivate people to give their time or resources to a cause, like aiding in disaster relief, present them with a personal story of a single, identifiable victim, ideally accompanied by a photo. This will help them feel a greater sense of personal connection and concern, especially if they are of a similar age to the victim or have other things in common. It is important not to overwhelm others with too many stories or facts—they can have the paradoxical effect of impeding the urge to give. For more on this technique, see the practice about [Putting a Human Face on Suffering](#).
3. **Encourage identification with “outgroup” members.** One of the greatest barriers to altruism is that of group difference: We feel much less obligated to help someone if he or she doesn't seem to be a member of our “ingroup”—we may even feel hostile toward members of an “outgroup.” But research suggests that who we see as part of our “ingroup” can be malleable. That's why a key to promoting altruism is emphasizing similarities that cut across group boundaries. On the broadest level, this could mean remembering that regardless of our political, cultural, or religious affiliations, we are all human beings and share common human experiences. For more on this technique, see the [Shared Identity](#) practice.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Pavey, L., Greitemeyer, T., & Sparks, P. (2011). [Highlighting relatedness promotes prosocial motives and behavior](#). *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 37(7), 905-917.

People who read words associated with human connectedness were more interested in volunteering for a charity and were more likely to donate money to a charity; similarly, people who wrote about a time they felt a close bond with someone else expressed greater intentions to help others in general.

Small, D. A., & Loewenstein, G. (2003). [Helping the victim or helping a victim: Altruism and identifiability](#). *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*, 26(1), 5–16.

People were more willing to compensate individuals who had lost money when the identities of those individuals were revealed, and they donated more to a charity when they knew that their donation would benefit a specific family that had been selected from a list.

Levine, M., Prosser, A., Evans, D., & Reicher, S. (2005). [Identity and emergency intervention: How social group membership and inclusiveness of group boundaries shape helping behavior](#). *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31(4), 443-453.

People were more likely to help a fallen jogger when the jogger was a fellow fan of the same soccer team than when the jogger was a fan of a rival team (as indicated by their shirt). But when people were reminded of a shared identity (being a soccer fan) that they shared with the fallen rival, they were more likely to help that person than they were to help a non-fan.

WHY IT WORKS

Although people generally want and try to be altruistic, other concerns—such as feelings of competition or allegiance to an “ingroup”—sometimes stand in the way. Reminding people to think about [social connectedness](#), [see victims as real people](#) rather than abstract statistics, and [feel a sense of common humanity](#) can help them overcome some of the obstacles to altruism and allow feelings of care and compassion to shine through. These techniques can all trigger the caretaking impulses that seem to be part of humans’ evolutionary heritage.

This practice is part of [Greater Good in Action](#), a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the [Greater Good Science Center](#) at UC Berkeley and [HopeLab](#).

