

MAKE GIVING FEEL GOOD

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



WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

One of the most encouraging findings to have emerged from the science of happiness is that people take delight in giving to others. In fact, several studies have found that spending money on others brings more happiness than spending on yourself. However, the research suggests that this isn't always true; certain factors need to be in place in order to maximize the psychological benefits of giving.

This exercise walks you through three key factors, highlighting the ways that acts of generosity—in yourself or others—can have the most positive effects on happiness.

TIME REQUIRED

The time required to follow all of these steps will vary, depending on circumstance. However, we suggest that you try to perform an act of kindness, guided by one or more of these steps, at least once per week.

HOW TO DO IT

While there are many factors that determine whether or how giving will promote happiness, below are three strategies that have been supported by research. They were singled out by researchers Elizabeth Dunn and Michael Norton in their book, *Happy Money: The Science of Smarter Spending*.

As Dunn and Norton report, these strategies can not only boost our own happiness but help us create more positive giving experiences for children, students, employees, donors, and others.

1. **Make it a choice.** Research suggests that when we feel obligated to give—such as when we feel cornered by an aggressive request—we are less likely to enjoy it. When people we care about ask us to contribute to a fundraiser or loan them money, it can be hard to say no. In these situations it can be helpful to step back and ask yourself, Do I really want to contribute? Remind yourself that it is OK to say no. This may result in less overall giving, but in many cases you may still decide you genuinely want to contribute, and those gifts will feel more gratifying and sincere. And if you're soliciting donations from others, keep in mind that even subtle changes to the language you use can make a big difference. Research suggests that if you explicitly remind people that it's their choice whether or not to help someone in need, they feel happier after they help out, provide higher-quality assistance, and feel a closer sense of connection to the person they helped.
2. **Make a connection.** Giving to those close to us often feels the best, but we can also use giving as an opportunity to become closer to them—and enjoy greater happiness as a result. For instance, instead of buying a gift certificate for someone, accompany them to the store and buy the gift with them. This will allow you to spend time with them and strengthen your relationship—and you will get to see the smile on their face while they're enjoying their gift. Even if you're giving to a stranger, there are often ways to increase the sense of connection, such as by taking the initiative to learn about the recipient. The education funding website [DonorsChoose.org](https://www.donorschoose.org) has tried to create a sense of emotional connection between donors and recipients by helping the donors learn more the teachers and students they are helping, beyond the financial transaction.
3. **Make an impact.** Witnessing the positive impact of a gift in others' lives is a major source of the happiness. And yet it can sometimes be hard to see how a contribution makes a concrete difference for others. That's why it helps to seek out charities, like [DonorsChoose](https://www.donorschoose.org) or [Spread the Net](https://www.spreadthenet.org), that try to make the concrete impact salient for donors. You can also take the initiative to

research the causes you support and understand the specific impact of your contribution. [See this video](#) of a bone marrow donor meeting the little girl whose life he saved for an example of how powerful it can be to learn about the impact of your generosity.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Weinstein, N., & Ryan, R. M. (2010). When helping helps: [Autonomous motivation for prosocial behavior and its influence on well-being for the helper and recipient](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 98, 222-244.

Four studies found that participants felt greater well-being after helping others when their help was self-chosen rather than externally dictated. This was true for helpful acts performed during participants' everyday lives as well as in a laboratory.

Aknin, L. B., Sandstrom, G. M., Dunn, E. W., & Norton, M. I. (2011). [Investing in others: Prosocial spending for \(pro\)social change](#). In R. Biswas-Diener (Ed.), *Positive Psychology as a Mechanism for Social Change*. London: Springer (219-234).

Participants who were told to use a \$10 Starbucks gift card to take another person out to coffee felt happier than participants who were told to give the gift card to someone else, without accompanying that person to Starbucks, or were told to use the gift card on themselves, but with a friend present. These results suggest that the combination of giving *and* connecting was most beneficial.

Aknin, L. B., Dunn, E. W., Whillans, A., Grant, A. M., & Norton, M. I. (2013). [Making a difference matters: Impact unlocks the emotional benefits of prosocial spending](#). *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, 88, 90-95.

Participants derived more happiness from giving money to a charity that explained how the funds would be used to make a difference in the life of a recipient than one that did not offer this explanation. A second study showed that reflecting on a past experience of giving led to greater happiness when it had a positive impact.

WHY IT WORKS

Giving feels especially good when it feels like a choice, rather than an obligation, in part because it allows people to express their generosity as well as their autonomy, and feelings of autonomy are key to general life satisfaction. Giving also feels better when it involves interpersonal connections because it helps satisfy what researchers consider to be a fundamental need for social connection, and it can also serve to enhance our close relationships. Finally, witnessing giving's positive impact on others' lives can elicit contagious feelings of joy and also increase one's own feeling that they can complete succeed at a task or goal—what researchers call “self-efficacy,” an important factor in well-being and resilience.

SOURCES

Dunn, E., & Norton, M. (2013). *Happy Money: The Science of Smarter Spending*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

[Elizabeth Dunn, Ph.D.](#), University of British Columbia

[Michael Norton, Ph.D.](#), Harvard Business School

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](#).

