REMINDERS OF CONNECTEDNESS

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. But we don't always act on our altruistic instincts.

Fortunately, studies have identified ways to elicit people's deeply rooted propensities for kindness. One of the most effective is to evoke a sense of connectedness among people. Research suggests that even subtle reminders of connection, operating below the conscious level, can lead to concrete, measurable increases in altruistic behavior. This exercise walks you through the process of considering how you can add reminders of social connection to your home, office, or classroom.

TIME REQUIRED

Take 10 minutes to complete the first three steps; after that, the amount of time it will take to complete the rest will vary. Try to go through this exercise at least once per month. After evaluating your classroom, office, or a room in your home, next month consider another room or environment over which you have control.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Take a moment to look around your home, office, or classroom. What kinds of objects, words, and images surround you?
2. Count how many of these objects, words, and images are related to social connectedness. This could include pictures of people interacting, words like "community," "together," or "friendship," or even two stuffed animals facing one another on a shelf.
3. Notice whether there are any empty walls or shelves where you could add new objects related to connectedness, or places where you could replace existing objects.
4. Next time you're out shopping, looking through your belongings, or (for parents or teachers) developing an art project for your children or students, see if you can find objects that evoke connection, even in a subtle way, and use them to fill these empty places or to replace existing objects.
5. Finally, consider how the furniture in this room is arranged. Are chairs facing toward or away from each other? Are there common spaces that are conducive to social interaction? Rearranging the layout of your home, office, or classroom can also help to promote feelings of connectedness.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Over, H., & Carpenter, M. (2009). Eighteen-month-old infants show increased helping following priming with

affiliation. *Psychological Science, 20*(10), 1189-1193.

Eighteen-month old children saw a series of photos that had different household objects in the foreground; for some of these children, in the background were two small dolls facing each other—a subtle reminder of connection. But for other children, in the background were two stacks of blocks, a single doll standing alone, or two dolls turned away from each other. After viewing the photos, all of the children had the opportunity to help an adult in need. The children who had seen the subtle reminder of connection were three times more likely to help the adult.

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.

WHY TO TRY IT

Although people generally want to be altruistic, we don't always act that way. This is sometimes simply because we are busy and distracted by other things, like personal problems or approaching deadlines. By creating reminders of social connection in your home, office, or classroom, you disrupt this self-focused tendency and reorient our attention to focus on other people. When we feel connected to others, we are more likely to want to help them—perhaps because, throughout humans' evolutionary history, caring for those close to us was essential to the survival of our species.

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.

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