

SHARED IDENTITY

Difficulty: **MODERATE** | Frequency: **1X/WEEK** | Duration: **10 MINS**



WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Research suggests that humans have a deeply rooted propensity to be kind and generous, but some obstacles can prevent us from acting on those altruistic impulses. One of the greatest barriers to altruism is that of group difference: We feel much less motivated to help someone if they don't seem to belong to our group or tribe—that is, if they're not a member of our “in-group”—and we may even feel hostile toward members of an “out-group.”

But studies have consistently found that who we see as part of our “in-group” can be malleable. That's why a key to promoting altruism, which involves acting to promote someone else's welfare even at a risk or cost to oneself, is recognizing commonalities with someone else, even if those similarities aren't immediately apparent. This exercise is designed to help expand one's sense of shared identity with others.

TIME REQUIRED

Take 15 minutes to go through the steps below. Try to repeat these steps with a different person at least once per week.

HOW TO DO IT

1. **Choose a person in your life who seems to be very different from you in every way that you can imagine.** They might have different interests, different religious or political beliefs, or different life experiences. They might even be someone with whom you have had a personal conflict, or someone who belongs to a group that has been in conflict with one of your social groups. You don't have to pick someone who makes you feel nervous or unsafe.
2. **Make a list of the things that you most likely share in common with this person.** Perhaps you both work for the same company or go to the same school. Maybe you both have children, or a significant other. Probably you have both had your heart broken at one point or another, or have lost a loved one. Remind yourself that you and this person are both human beings.
3. **Review the list you made.** Do the things you listed make you see this person in a new light? Instead of simply seeing this person as unfamiliar or as an outsider, try to see them as a regular person, one whose tastes and experiences might overlap with yours in certain ways.
4. **Repeat this exercise.** Try it whenever you meet someone who initially seems different from you, who has a conflict with you, or who you feel uncomfortable around.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

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.

Male university students in England 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 participants were reminded of a shared identity with the fallen rival (being a soccer fan), they were more likely to help than they were to help a non-fan.

Leary, M. R., Tipsord, J. M., & Tate, E. B. (2008). [Allo-inclusive identity: Incorporating the social and natural worlds into one's sense of self](#). In H. A. Wayment & J. J. Bauer (Eds.), *Transcending self-interest: Psychological explorations of the quiet ego* (pp. 137-147). Washington: APA.

American participants who reported feeling a greater sense of connection to other people, regardless of group distinctions, and to the natural world at large also reported less egocentricity, more concern for others, and less interest in having power over others.

Who has tried the practice?

Additional studies explore how a sense of shared identity affects various groups:

- [Caucasian U.S. citizens](#) read one of two statements: one that highlighted the shared immigrant identity of all American residents, or one that highlighted the separate identity of Caucasian citizens and immigrants. Compared to those who read about separate identity, those who read about shared identity were more likely to donate a 40-cent participation bonus to a nonprofit human rights organization.
- [Norwegian adults](#) who indicated that “Norwegians and Muslim immigrants represent one and the same group” were more likely to support the rights of Muslim immigrants than Norwegian adults who indicated that “Norwegians and Muslim immigrants represent two different groups.” A [study](#) with Caucasian U.S. citizens had similar findings with respect to immigrants.
- [Vietnamese American university students](#) (immigrants and children of refugees) felt less hostile and expressed more support toward other refugees and immigrants after journaling about their experiences of oppression. Students felt more hostile and expressed less support if they didn't reflect on the struggles they might have in common.
- [Dutch college students](#) read about harmful Dutch stereotypes in Europe and then wrote a short essay about their Dutch identity or their collective European identity. When an Italian lab assistant spilled a box of pens, students who had written about their shared European identity picked up more pens than students who had written about their Dutch identity.
- [Disadvantaged minority groups in India](#) expressed more support of Bhutanese refugees after journaling about their struggles and were less supportive if they did not reflect on struggles that they might have in common.

More research is needed to explore whether, and how, the impact of this practice extends to other groups and cultures.

WHY TO TRY IT

Although people generally want and try to be altruistic, they may also feel competitive toward people outside of their “in-group,” and the boundaries of their in-group might shrink at times when resources seem scarce or they are fearful for their safety. Reminding people to see the basic humanity that they share with those who might seem different from them can help overcome fear and distrust and promote cooperation. Even small similarities, like recognizing a shared love of sports, can foster a greater sense of kinship across group boundaries. Importantly, recognizing commonalities doesn't mean negating differences, but may in fact help people value differences rather than feeling threatened by them.

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](#).

