

SHARED IDENTITY

Difficulty: **MODERATE** | Frequency: **1X/WEEK** | Duration: **15 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. Think of 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 may even be someone with whom you have had a personal conflict, or who belongs to a group that has been in conflict with a group to which you belong.
2. Next, make a list of all 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. At the broadest level, you both belong to the human species, which means that you share 99.9 percent of your DNA.
3. Review this list of commonalities. How do they make you see this person in a new light? Instead of simply seeing this person as someone unfamiliar to you, or as a member of an out-group, now try to see this person as an individual, one whose tastes and experiences might overlap with yours in certain ways.
4. Repeat this exercise whenever you meet someone who initially seems different from you, with whom you have a conflict, or who makes you feel uncomfortable.

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.

Participants 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.

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.

WHY IT WORKS

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](#).

