

What is Altruism?

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The word 'altruism' was coined by the French philosopher Auguste Comte. Altruism is the opposite of selfishness and is a form of prosocial behaviour – a voluntary act of giving to others without thought of self-benefit or gain.

However, some psychologists say altruism doesn't really exist as we do get something from our unselfish acts: an altruistic act may give us a good feeling about ourselves, a sense of connection with others, or a word of thanks or a smile from the person receiving our 'gift'. Therefore, in reality, both parties involved in an altruistic act benefit from the 'gift', whether this is giving our time, undertaking a random act of kindness and care, putting coins in the hat of a busker, giving money to The Big Issue sellers or a favoured charity or a few empathetic words to someone having a tough day.

As we develop and gain more experience of life and its challenges, our ability to put ourselves in 'other people's shoes' and understand other people's subjective experiences also develops; sometimes we may even have been in similar situations ourselves. This can give rise to feelings of empathy, the desire and ability to show understanding and concern, but not pity, to another individual. It follows that the more we feel empathy the greater will be our tendency to be altruistic.

It is an accepted premise that the more we care for others, the less we will be concerned with any rewards we might receive from them. For example, love is a powerful emotion that we can all experience and, as it is based on the care and concern we have for another, it naturally leads us to exhibit altruistic behaviour. But, would altruism exist if we didn't have the motivation, means and opportunity to love and care for another?

In 2008 a Harvard Business School study by Professor Michael Norton found that giving money to someone else lifted participants' happiness more than spending it on themselves! In the same year the National Economic Foundation identified 'giving', whether money, time or a smile as one of the 5 foundations of 'wellbeing'.

The film Pay it Forward, based on the book of the same title by Catherine Ryan Hyde, has now set in motion an annual event in April where people are encouraged to perform random acts of kindness to 3 or more people and ask them to do the same, or Pay it Forward. But why wait for April?



There is no time like today to be altruistic; buy a homeless person a coffee, pay for someone's bus ticket when they don't have enough change, say 'Hello' to that colleague you see most days but have never spoken to, or laugh it off when someone is worried that they might have made a mistake that you will be angry about. You never know, it might even make you feel better too.

For more information go to:

www.greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/5_ways_giving_is_good_for_you | www.neweconomics.org/projects/entry/five-ways-to-well-being



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