

insights

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Be Kind to Yourself by Being Kind to Others

As summer vacation approaches, it is not uncommon for students and staff alike to anticipate the ways in which they will relax and treat themselves after a long year of study and work. Popular Western culture typically encourages a focus on oneself to reduce stress and increase happiness. Lie on the beach, go out for a special meal or dessert, take in a concert, get a massage, splurge on a new outfit, spend time on a favorite hobby – these are just a few ways that we might plan to treat ourselves.

There is certainly a place for any and all of the above acts of self-kindness. But, as students and their families begin to make summer plans for rest and rejuvenation, it might be useful for them to consider the findings of a recent study by psychologists who found that kind actions toward others have a greater impact on happiness and psychological well-being than acts of self-kindness.

In reviewing the existing literature on happiness and psychological flourishing, the authors found considerable evidence that prosocial behavior (any act with the goal of benefitting another) improves mood and boosts happiness much more than self-focused behavior. In their study, however, they sought to compare self-focused behavior with two types of prosocial behavior, everyday acts of kindness directed toward specific people vs. acts to improve the world, such as volunteering, promoting conservation, etc. In addition, they hypothesized that improvements in happiness and well-being would be related to reported increases in positive emotions and decreases in negative emotions.

For six weeks the researchers studied a diverse population of 472 adults aged 17-67. Participants were divided into three groups, with instructions to engage in and record acts of kindness directed toward another person, toward improving humanity or the world, or toward themselves. They completed weekly questionnaires that measured psychological flourishing and both positive and negative emotions.

Results of this study were consistent with previous findings that prosocial behavior leads to statistically significant increases in happiness and well-being as compared with

acts of self-kindness. The researchers found no differences, however, between acts directed toward specific people vs. humanity at large, and they found that changes in happiness appear to be mediated by increases in positive emotions only, not by decreases in negative emotions.

Teachers can contribute to the psychological flourishing of their students by:

- Encouraging students and their parents to include service activities among their summer plans.
- Helping students create a summer “kindness plan” that includes kind acts toward self, others, and the world, with an instruction to record their feelings after each action.
- Helping students and parents understand that while prosocial behaviors reliably produce greater happiness than self-focused acts of kindness, there is also considerable evidence that a mental stance of self-kindness or self-compassion is also associated with psychological well-being. Self-compassion includes recognizing that one’s own experience is consistent with the larger human experience, while withholding harsh judgments of the self.
- Educating students about research findings that suggest that efforts to increase positive emotions, while facing and accepting negative emotions, are linked to greater happiness and well-being. ■

Reference:

Nelson, S. K., Layous, K., Cole, S. W., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2016, April 21). Do Unto Others or Treat Yourself? The Effects of Prosocial and Self-Focused Behavior on Psychological Flourishing. *Emotion*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/emo0000178>

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