

Nataliya Zubar
Social Psychology
September, 2013



The Day of Compassion

I make a living helping people. The non-governmental organization (NGO) that I work for helps people whose civil rights are violated; I consult at least five people a day on different issues. I am also an activist affiliated with several other NGOs focusing on everything from civic education to media freedoms. I support many charities, and I'm often the person whom others call for help.

To live a day helping even more than normal was a challenge for me. I think of compassion as helping people in need voluntarily and wholeheartedly, and I've lived a compassionate life for as long as I can remember. Still, I had an assignment to complete, so I ended up inventing an experiment.

I wore a prominent sign that said "Need help? Ask me!" and walked along a crowded street in my city. I live in large Ukrainian city with 1.4 million people, and I've never seen anyone with a sign offering help, so I guessed that it would get the attention of passersby. It did. On the Day of Compassion, I spent five hours wearing the sign and interacting with strangers.

I also prepared a flyer describing the Day of Compassion (see pages 3-4), and I gave a copy to everyone who asked what I was doing. All told, I handed out 152 flyers and talked in depth with 22 strangers about their problems.*

In most cases, I helped people articulate their problem, and I provided them with contacts of organizations that could be of further assistance. I had prepared a long list of contacts in advance, but the only professionals whom people needed were lawyers, psychologists, and teachers. Nobody required government services; most people needed only someone to listen to them.



* I had a friend help me by talking to people who were not seeking any help and wanted to joke or talk about other matters. He made sure that no one impeded my activities. He also explained to police officers what was going on and why they should not interfere. Nobody did interfere, which was the only surprise for me; I had expected some kind of vandalism, hecklers, or other problems.

Social Reactions and Analysis

People were initially surprised and later very thankful. One called me the next day and said that I saved his marriage. I think it was a good and fruitful day.

My behavior was not much different from any other day; only the setting was different—the street instead of the office. I've been a public person for quite some time, so the experience didn't feel any different from a press conference or other interactions with the public.

The only psychological cost of behaving compassionately that I can think of is the time required. You need time for people to open up to you and accept your help. This process cannot work fast unless you are a very skilled communicator and you can stretch the perceived time so people don't think they're unimportant (people typically reason that the more time you spend on them, the more important they are). At least here in the Ukraine, most people find it difficult to speak and think quickly when it comes to their personal troubles. Compassion takes time.

Some Concluding Notes

The most crucial factor in compassion is that you should not be afraid to offer help. You should be prepared for different reactions to your offer. Many people who want to be of help end up growing discouraged if their offers of assistance are rejected, or they worry about what other people think of them. Compassionate people tend to be braver and be better communicators than other people are. They are also more cheerful and usually consider themselves happier. In 2006, my organization studied civic activists in the Ukraine and found this to be the case, so these conclusions are not just speculations.

I think that the more compassionate a society is, the happier it will be (and everyone wants to be happy). In my opinion, this is the key to effectively promote compassion.

День дієвого співчуття

Кожен визначає такий день для себе сам.

Дієве співчуття це бажання допомогти іншій, навіть незнайомій людині, яка в скруті, хвора, немічна, або просто розгублена і потребує підтримки. Не просто поспівчувати, а зробити щось самому для цієї людини.

Чи звертаєте ви увагу на людей навколо, які погано себе почувають? Може до них треба викликати лікаря чи піти в аптеку купити ліки?

В нас є традиція давати милостиню, але чи пробували ви спитати жебраків, чи потрібна їм інша допомога? Можливо ви знаєте щось чи когось, хто може радикально змінити їх життя?

Чи намагалися ви спитати дуже сумну людину, чи не хоче вона поговорити про своє горе? Така розмова може змінити життя.



Я робила все це сама, і з кожним разом все більше переконувалася в тому, що це треба робити більше і більше.

Вияв такої ініціативи поки не є традицією в нашому суспільстві. Але подумайте, чи було б вам приємно, якби ви опинилися в скруті і незнайома людина запропонувала вам допомогу?

Спробуйте колись самі так зробити, а потім оцініть, як самі ви почуваетесь після такого спілкування. Ви будете здивовані!

Дослідження з соціальної психології підтверджують, що люди, які постійно допомагають іншим, почуваються набагато щасливішими.

Будьте щасливі! *Don't worry, be happy!*

Ваша, **Наталка Зубар**. Пишіть мені на panimaidan@gmail.com

The Day of Compassion (English translation)

You decide yourself when to hold this day.

Compassion is the willingness to help others, even strangers who are in need, ill, disabled, or just lost and need support. Compassion means not just feeling pity for others, but doing something for them.

Have you ever noticed people around you who look like they're not feeling well? Maybe they need someone to take them to a doctor or buy medicine for them.

We have a tradition of giving money to beggars, but have you ever tried asking them whether they need help other than money? Maybe you know something or someone who could completely change their life.

Have you ever tried asking very sad people whether they want to talk about their grief? Just a conversation might change their life.



I have done it myself, and with each new try, I've become increasingly convinced that these acts of compassion should be performed more and more.

Such initiatives are not traditional for our society yet. But wouldn't it be nice to receive such attention and help from a stranger when you need it?

Try to offer someone help and see how you feel afterwards. You'll be surprised!

Social psychology studies confirm that people who often help others feel much happier.

Don't worry, be happy!

Yours truly, **Nataliya Zubar**. Write to me at panimaidan@gmail.com

Notes about the flyer: The photo is from last March and shows me consulting with a woman who desperately needed someone to talk to (photo used with her permission). I should also note that the Ukrainian language has no direct translation of the word "compassion." The word *spivchuttya*, used in most translations, does not reflect the activity component of compassion. Spivchuttya is also translated as condolence, sympathy, or empathy. This is why I used the two words "active spivchuttya" to convey the idea of an active day of compassion.