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Setting Off Chain Reactions of Compassion

On my Day of Compassion, I defined compassion as doing all the good you can, for all the people you can, at all the times you can, in all the places you can, for as long as you can. During that day, I performed many acts of compassion or kindness, but in this report, I will focus on three specific acts, the first two of which took place before the Day of Compassion. The idea behind each of these efforts was to trigger what I call "chain-reaction compassion"—that is, acts of compassion that encourage other people to behave compassionately, in turn leading even more people to behave similarly in ever-expanding circles.

A Basket of Compassion

Most people in my home country, Pakistan, are not very wealthy. The World Bank estimates that approximately one in three Pakistanis live in poverty, and it's common to see people begging on the roads or in marketplaces. In the area of Islamabad where I live, there's a small market with numerous shops, and I often visit them to buy food and other items. When I do, I'm soon surrounded by people asking for money or food.

Normally, I help them out. But after reading a WhatsApp post about "Baskets of Virtue," I decided to try a new way of showing compassion. I went to a local bread shop with a basket that had the words *Neki Ki Tokri* (i.e., "Basket of Virtue") written on it. In Pakistan, the Urdu word for "Virtue" is *Neki*, which people understand as something that is for charity and that brings spiritual benefits. I then asked the shop owner to hang the basket in a location that was visible (but wouldn't disturb business) so that shoppers could put food items into the basket for people living in poverty. That single empty basket started a chain reaction in which visitors to the shop donated food on daily basis, and people in need were able to visit the shop and get food directly from the basket, rather than asking people for handouts.

Initially, customers purchased bread from the shop and put it in the basket. However, with the passage of time, the basket received other food items and even money. Once the chain reaction got going, the basket would get filled and emptied several times a day.

Funding a Chain of Marriages

In Pakistan, marriages take place in a different way than they do in most countries. In one province, unless the family of the bride buys items like furniture, jewelry, crockery, and utensils, no one will agree to marry the woman. In two other provinces, the family of the groom—or the groom himself—must pay cash to the family of the bride. Unless this money is paid, the marriage will not move forward. In such cases, marriages are delayed and families may even go into debt trying to save the necessary money.

In my own family, two men got engaged around four years ago but couldn't pay the required money to the family of their bride—a difficult situation that threatened to prevent them from getting married. Both men were quite anxious and depressed over their predicament. To help them out, I decided to pay the necessary sums (approximately \$550 each) with funds I had saved for vacations outside Pakistan, and I'm pleased to report that they were both able to get married. When my relatives promised to pay me back in the future, I asked them each instead to pay for the marriage of another couple in need rather than returning the money to me. The idea was to trigger another chain reaction of compassion by having the money be given from couple to couple, helping multiple families along the way.

Filling Other People's Bottles

In our locality, residents often go to a filtration plant with large bottles to fill water for domestic consumption. I visit the plant myself each month. The last time I went, there was a huge line of people waiting to fill their bottles. It was also a very hot day, with temperatures reaching nearly 40 degrees centigrade (over 100 degrees Fahrenheit). When my turn came, I selected an old person and filled his bottles instead of mine. This act encouraged others who were young to give up their turn by filling the bottles of elderly people. I will never forget the elders who thanked me with tearful and shining eyes.

Although this act of kindness was small, it ignited a chain reaction of compassion, which is why I am describing what happened.

Reflections on the Day of Compassion

If your behavior was different than normal, which person did you like more: the "Day of Compassion you" or the "normal you"?

My behavior on the Day of Compassion was fairly normal. For me, every day is a day of compassion, and I give money to people in need almost daily. In fact, the day I don't carry out an act of kindness is a day I'd consider bad.

What are the psychological costs and benefits of behaving compassionately? In your view, do the benefits outweigh the costs?

In my view, the psychological cost of behaving compassionately is zero, and the benefits are incalculable. Kindness gives birth to myriad virtues, and there is no greater joy than the happiness, contentment, and meaning that result from acts of compassion.



Lining up to fill jugs with drinking water

If you wanted to encourage others to behave as you did during the Day of Compassion, what psychological techniques would you use? How can social psychology be used to foster a more compassionate society?

Even though anyone can learn to become more compassionate, I believe it's easiest to learn when you're young. In my own case, my mother taught my siblings and me to carry out acts of kindness and compassion whenever possible.

For instance, when I was 10 or 11 years old, my mother would give me sugar, tea, salt, spices, or flour, wrapped in a piece of cloth, and send me to deliver it to relatives in need. Occasionally, she would also hand me money to give to relatives. That's how my siblings and I got trained at an early age. Second, two unknown people provided money for me to finish my education. These experiences had a lasting effect on me. Consistent with the norm of reciprocity, people who receive support tend to give support to others.

In keeping with this family tradition, one element of my Day of Compassion is that I carried out acts of compassion in the presence of my two children (aged 7 and 8) and asked them to do the same. This hands-on learning experience taught them to pay attention to people in need, and it helped them experience the pleasure that arises when they practice compassion.

To take an example, on the Day of Compassion I took my children to the bread shop, bought some bread, asked my children to put it into the basket, and explained the concept to them. During that day, I also gave them some coins to give people in need, and I asked them to share their bicycles with friends. By giving my children bread or coins to share with others, these small acts of kindness travel farther and have a greater effect than if I carry them out myself, because they teach my children to live a life of virtue—the same lesson I learned from my mother in a chain reaction of her own that now spans three generations.

In sum, I believe that the best way to encourage others to behave compassionately is to show compassion to them or in front of them, modeling the desired behavior and establishing social norms. This is why I focused on creating chain reactions to spread kindness and happiness—people often accept those things they can see or feel. Second, positive behaviors can be spread by telling others about the benefits of such acts, and by inviting people to give it a try. What is there to lose?

Epilogue from Professor Plous

This Day of Compassion was carried out in June of 2020. A few months after hanging the Basket of Virtue, it became clear that the basket not only fed people in need—it attracted customers and increased sales, leading other shops to hang similar baskets. Today, the Basket of Virtue from this Day of Compassion still hangs in the same bread shop, where it's been filled and emptied more than a thousand times in a continuing chain reaction of compassion.