

The Many, Mini, Ways to Show You Care

Showing you care is much easier than you think according to new research

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You're riding on a crowded escalator, and without realizing it, your earbuds have dropped out of your pocket and are about to go tumbling into oblivion. Someone taps you on the shoulder and, to your surprise, hands them to you. There was no particular reason for this person to be so helpful and, in fact, they were pretty costly earbuds that almost anyone would want to have. A few days later, you're in a slightly different situation, where you have the potential to be the person who provides a small favor. A mother is struggling down the sidewalk, trying to juggle her child's stroller and an armful of loaded shopping bags. You smile at her and offer to hold one of the bags while she regains her grip on them. Your offer is greeted with the same relief you felt when those earbuds made their way back to you.

Acts of helpfulness to strangers are just one small example of the ways we can be kind to others without exerting a good deal of effort. The variations on how to do this are almost endless. You hold open a door, let someone pass ahead of you in line, stop to let a car enter into the lane of traffic, or say "thank you" to the person at the other end of a customer service phone line. These simple niceties provide the interpersonal oil that smooths the way to make all of life's little inconveniences that much less stressful. More than that, new research shows that these mini acts of caring can benefit the giver and the recipient.

Before describing the new research on caring's benefits, some context helps shows the origins of this emerging field which, oddly enough, comes from research on the ugliest aspects of human behavior. Researchers studying prejudice and stereotyping have drilled down from overt acts of [discrimination](#) to what they call "micro-aggressions," or the small barbs that make people feel different and inferior on the basis of their [gender](#), race, [ethnicity](#), sexual orientation, or nationality (among other qualities). Particularly because outright discrimination is now considered not only hurtful but actually illegal, people who wish to inflict damage on someone from a targeted group resort to these micro-aggression, the subtler forms of discrimination that are harder to pinpoint.

You might have felt to be a target of a microaggression when, for example, you've been cut off while speaking in front of a group by the person leading the group whose social group membership is very different from your own. Perhaps you've been part of a [workplace](#) watercooler chat when a man makes a disparaging remark about another woman, or a woman lumps all men together as a group who can't be trusted. Even

though the speaker in both cases may say “Of course, I don’t mean you,” it’s hard not to feel the twinge of having been slighted.

Flipping the equation over, a **micro-affirmation** has the opposite flavor in that it is a comment or action that elevates your humanity and common bonds with others. A concept developed by MIT’s [Mary Rowe](#), **It’s an [act](#) of “kindness’ in that sense, but it’s also a very subtle type of assertion that brings people together rather than differentiating them and disparaging those who are “different.’ Those small acts of kindness provide validation of your shared identity with the people in your world, even if you only inhabit that shared world for a few moments. Over time, these acts build on themselves, because just as you appreciate being the recipient of help, you also feel better about yourself when your helpful actions have clearly made an impact. Leading people to feel that they matter, rather than that they’re unimportant, is the process at the heart of a micro-affirmation.**

Recent research supports the value of a version of a micro-affirmation in which people are encouraged to engage in self-affirmations by identifying their own strengths and positive self-worth. University of Manchester’s (UK) Christopher Armitage and University of Sheffield’s Richard Rowe (2017) believed that such self-affirmations could reduce relational aggression in teens. In these highly-charged early years of people's lives, there is a common tendency to be mean and exclusive to people who don't "fit in." Could this process be reversed or halted with self-affirmations?

More specifically, based on the work of Stanford University’s Claude Steele (1988), a self-affirmation reduces the individual’s tendency to lash out at others in ways that are hurtful and destructive. **The theory proposes that “people are motivated to preserve a positive, [moral](#), and adaptive [self-image](#) and to maintain self-integrity... self-affirming in one domain should reduce the need to be defensive in another domain” (p. 490). In other words, one way that people might be nicer to each other might be by helping them to be nicer to themselves.**

Using a sample of 503 teens between the ages of 11 and 16, the British researchers invoked a self-affirmation manipulation by asking one group of participants to recall and give examples of their own past acts of kindness. Some of the questions included in the self-affirmation questionnaire included “Have you ever forgiven another person when they have hurt you?,” “Have you ever been concerned with the [happiness](#) of another person?,” and “Have you ever felt satisfied when you have helped another person?” If participants replied “yes” to any of these questions, they were then asked to provide specific examples. In the control condition, participants were asked a series of questions with neutral meanings about topics such as the weather and their favorite trees. Participants also read an anti-relational aggression message that emphasized the destructive [nature](#) of hurting or being “mean” to their classmates. The researchers

measured the impact of reading this message on attitudes toward harming others in the kindness and non-kindness manipulation conditions.

One month after this initial experiment, participants also reported on the frequency of their committing aggressive acts. As predicted, those who received the kindness intervention reported fewer of such acts. Furthermore, reading the informational message alone about the negative consequences of being hurtful to others was not enough to produce behavior change. This manipulation had to be coupled with the self-affirmation exercise in order for it to be effective.

Returning to the question of how micro-affirmations might operate, **these findings suggest that by being actively kind toward others you're engaging in your own *in vivo* self-affirmation exercise. In the moment, you know you're being helpful. This makes you feel that you're a better person** and therefore, you become less defensive about your self-worth. In turn, when you're the recipient of a kind act, this can also trigger your own [self-esteem](#) boosting mechanisms. "If someone is nice to me, it must mean that I'm a good person," you might conclude, whether consciously or not. A microaffirmation thus becomes a self-affirmation in both directions

During a stressful period of history, when people's sensitivity to their differences are brought up on a daily basis by those who would give unduly preferential treatment to some, it seems particularly important to engage your microaffirmation machinery. In late 2017 America, the atmosphere seems more highly charged than ever as the daily news provides example after example of new and unheard of indiscretions by celebrities, political figures, and leaders in the arts and sciences. Although those who come forth with their allegations about past abuses can feel a sense of relief at finally being heard, conversations involving these touchy subjects can generate a lot of ill will between people whose interpretation of these events divides along party, gender, or other sociocultural lines.

Because bridging such gaps presents what some might regard as insurmountable challenges, it might be more reasonable to propose that individuals start with these tiny acts of kindness. One by one, you can help to affirm both your own humanity and that of others with small gestures whose impact can grow over time. As you do, your fulfillment can grow as you build your connections with the many people whose lives intersect, perhaps only briefly, with yours.