

Doing good deeds helps socially anxious people relax

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Being busy with acts of kindness can help people who suffer from social anxiety to mingle more easily. This is the opinion of Canadian researchers Jennifer Trew of Simon Fraser University and Lynn Alden of the University of British Columbia, in a study published in Springer's journal *Motivation and Emotion*.

Sufferers from social anxiety are more than just a little shy. Dealings with others might make them feel so threatened or anxious that they often actively avoid socializing. Although this protects them from angst and possible embarrassment, they lose out on the support and intimacy gained from having relationships with others. They have fewer friends, feel insecure when interacting with others, and often do not experience emotional intimacy even in close relationships.

Performing acts of [kindness](#) to the benefit of others is known to increase happiness and may lead to positive interactions and perceptions of the world at large. The present study investigated if, over time, the pro-social nature of kindness changes the level of anxiety that socially anxious people experienced while interacting with others, and helped them to engage more easily. It extends previous findings by Alden and Trew about the value that doing [good deeds](#) holds to socially anxious people.

Undergraduate students who experience high levels of social anxiety were enrolled in the study. The 115 participants were randomly assigned into three groups for the four-week intervention period. One group performed acts of kindness, such as doing a roommate's dishes, mowing a neighbour's lawn, or donating to a charity. The second group was only exposed to social interactions and was not asked to engage in such deeds, while the third group participated in no specific intervention and simply recorded what happened each day.

A greater overall reduction in patients' desire to

avoid social situations was found among the group who actively lent a helping hand. This effect was most notable in the initial phase of the intervention. The findings therefore support the value of acts of kindness as an avoidance reduction strategy. It helps to counter feelings of possible rejection and temporary levels of anxiety and distress. It also does so faster than was the case for the participants who were merely exposed to social interactions without engaging in good deeds.

According to Trew and Alden, interventions involving acts of kindness may over time help socially anxious people lead more satisfying and engaging lives, and see changes in their disposition.

"Acts of kindness may help to counter negative social expectations by promoting more positive perceptions and expectations of a person's social environment," explains Trew. "It helps to reduce their levels of [social anxiety](#) and, in turn, makes them less likely to want to avoid [social situations](#)."

"An intervention using this technique may work especially well early on while participants anticipate positive reactions from others in response to their kindness," adds Alden.

More information: Trew, J.L. & Alden, L.E. (2015). Kindness Reduces Avoidance Goals in Socially Anxious Individuals, *Motivation and Emotion*. DOI: [10.1007/s11031-015-9499-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-015-9499-5)

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