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[Wellness](#)

If we're all caught in a dangerous pandemic, where does the impulse to help others come from?



A volunteer puts gloves on before serving lunch at My Brother's Table soup kitchen in Lynn, Mass., on March 30. (Joseph Prezioso/AFP/Getty Images)

By Galadriel Watson

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My husband is a registered nurse. On the evenings that he works until 7, I usually have dinner waiting for him. One recent Friday, however, he came home already full. An unnamed donor had bought the hospital staff takeout from a local burger shack.

It was a two-birds-one-stone kind of thing: an anonymous thank you to front-line workers (although, luckily, covid-19 hasn't yet hit our town) and a boost to a small business. It was also an example of the many ways people have recently stepped up, all over the country: sewing

homemade masks, stocking free lending libraries, creating seed banks for neighborhood gardeners or scouring stores to purchase toilet paper for the elderly.

These are heartwarming examples. But they raise an interesting question. Why, when their own welfare is so clearly at stake, do people share resources or risk exposure to the virus to help others?

Today's woolly mammoth

It comes down to the term “prosocial.” According to Craig Parks, a professor of social psychology and a vice provost at Washington State University, “ ‘Prosocial’ means that when you have a choice between acting in your personal best interests or acting in the best interest of the collective, that you opt for the latter.”

While looking out only for ourselves is sometimes extremely important, we have evolved to be concerned with the greater good. “Humans are naturally prosocial,” says Parks. “They had to be in order to survive.”

Imagine being a prehistoric man, hunting woolly mammoth. Alone, you might manage to kill the beast, but it would be difficult to protect the carcass from other predators. Form a multi-person hunting party, though, and “you’re not going to get nearly as much meat as if you hunted by yourself, but you’ve got a much greater chance of success and a much greater chance of living to see another day,” Parks says.

Today, the “beast” isn’t a huge, tusked animal but a microscopic, ruthless virus. And it’s not something you can battle on your own.

Nature vs. nurture

In pre-covid-19 life, examples of how we’re prosocial abound. We donate blood, give money to charity. If we see someone with a flat tire and can offer aid, we stop and lend a hand. We help someone in a wheelchair get unstuck from a rut.

One possible reason for this behavior is because society expects it of us. “In most cultures, there is a norm that if you see somebody who is truly struggling, clearly worse off than you, then you should try to help if you’re at all able,” says Parks.

Those who deliver supplies to isolated or quarantined households during the pandemic, therefore, may be doing so because they’ve been raised to think: “Let’s pitch in and try to get something to them.”

But there may also be selfish reasons to deliver goods. If we’re enabling others to stay home and thereby slowing the spread of the virus, we’re ultimately protecting ourselves. A principle called generalized reciprocity also might be at work: “I will help somebody now, because eventually somebody will provide help for me.”

Then again, prosocial behaviors may be driven by emotions other than selfishness or societal pressures. [One study](#) looked at 36 2-year-old children. The researchers measured the dilation of the children's pupils, which increases when a person sees an emotionally arousing event, including someone needing help. In this experiment, an adult couldn't reach an item like a crayon. When seeing the adult in distress, the children's pupils generally expanded. If no one aided the adult, the pupils remained large. If the children were allowed to hand over the crayon, the pupils contracted. Interestingly, the children's pupils also contracted if someone else aided the adult. It seems the children weren't motivated by wanting praise, and were too young to be bowing to cultural demands. They simply wanted the adult's need to be met.

All hands on board

When it comes to giving, Parks said there are three types of people overall.

The first are already actively prosocial; they will continue to be so during this crisis.

The second focus more on themselves, while caring little about what happens to others. In today's unprecedented circumstances, however, even they would likely act prosocial, Parks says. This comes back to that idea of generalized reciprocity, plus slowing the spread of the virus to protect themselves.

The final are competitive; they care how they're doing in relation to others and want to come out on top. However, there are situations "when even a really competitive person will set aside their competitive urge because they know if they behave competitively, they will really be opening themselves up for a lot of social scorn," Parks says.

Even professional sports teams have canceled their seasons, he adds. "This not the time to be emphasizing winners and losers. This is the time for all of us to pull together."

Pro-social pros

In addition to survival, there are many other reasons to give.

Lara Aknin is an associate professor of social psychology at Canada's Simon Fraser University and director of its Helping and Happiness Lab. As indicated by the name of the lab, research shows that helping and happiness go hand in hand.

"Around the world," she says, "people who engage in generous actions report higher levels of life satisfaction." The [World Happiness Report](#), for example, looks at the state of happiness in 156 countries; it has found that generosity is one of the top six predictors of happiness.

This could be because happier people do more prosocial acts, but Aknin's own studies show it also works the other way around. "Humans derive pleasure from helping others," she says.

[One of her studies](#) looked at 20 toddlers. It found that, even before age 2, the children expressed more happiness when handing over treats to others (in this case, a puppet) than when receiving treats themselves; researchers noted that a “warm glow” often followed this prosocial act.

In another of her studies, to be published later this year, researchers gave more than 700 university students money to buy a goody bag of treats and drinks. They were randomly assigned to keep the goody bags for themselves or to donate them to sick children at a children’s hospital. Afterward, they reported on their levels of happiness. “Those who bought the goody bag for the sick child were significantly happier,” she says.

Parks add that at this nerve-racking time, being prosocial can also help you alleviate anxiety, tension and fear. It can boost your feelings of pride — for the way people in your community are pulling together and for yourself. He says, “It might lead you to see yourself as a somewhat better person than perhaps you did.”

Contributing by doing nothing

No matter your motivations, there are myriad [ways to help others](#) over the coming weeks or months: [drop off a “self-isolation survival kit” to a family](#), [play an instrument for others to enjoy](#), [purchase gift cards to support a restaurant](#), [donate to food banks](#), [decorate your yard to lift moods](#) or [clap for the efforts of health care workers](#).

Parks says, “You should engage in behaviors to the best of your ability.” If you feel you could be participating, but aren’t, however, don’t feel too guilty. Akin emphasizes this is an extraordinary situation.

“This is one of those unique times in which just staying off the streets is actually a prosocial act.”

Galadriel Watson is a freelance writer and author of many books for kids, including “[Extreme Abilities](#)” and the upcoming “[Running Wild](#).”