

Character Strengths of Altruism: Kindness, Love, Forgiveness

Lecture 8
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Does Altruism Exist?

- **Discuss this question in groups.**
- “Universal egoism” claims “that everything we do, no matter how noble and beneficial to others, is really directed toward the ultimate goal of self-benefit.” Even love – including intimacy - could be just raw selfishness, or evolutionary drive for survival of individual and species, or just a chemical reaction (in terms of neurotransmitters) in the body.
- “Advocates of altruism do not deny that the motivation for much of what we do, including much that we do for others, is egoistic. But they claim that there is more. They claim that at least some of us, to some degree, under some circumstances, are capable of a qualitatively different form of motivation, motivation with an ultimate goal of benefiting someone else” (Batson & Shaw, 1991, p.107).

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Love and Kindness

- While love is a deep relationship with someone who is familiar to us, kindness is often directed to a stranger or one less close.
- Love is also referred to as intimacy (Peterson, 2006, p.32), or as attachment (Hazan & Shaver, 2004) and is different from compassion or kindness.

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Love

- “Love represents a cognitive, behavioural, and emotional stance toward others that takes three prototypical forms. One is love for the individuals who are our primary sources of affection, protection, and care... [like] a child’s love for a parent. Another form is love for the individuals who depend on us to make them feel safe and cared for... [for instance,] a parent’s love for a child. The third form is love that involves passionate desire for sexual, physical, and emotional closeness with an individual whom we consider special and who makes us feel special” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p.304).

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Love & Wellbeing

“Throughout the Western world, married people of both sexes report more happiness than those never married, divorced, or separated” (Myers & Diener, 1995 p. 15).

Being in a relationship and being satisfied with this relationship are positive correlated to happiness; those in relationship reported to be happier than those not in a relationship (See works of Hendrick & Hendrick).

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Kindness

- Kindness, generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, and “niceness” are closely related terms that indicate “a common orientation of the self toward the other” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p.326).
- Kindness consists in doing favours or good deeds to others, while compassion is more related to the emotion evoked at the sufferings of others.

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Compassion

- Compassion is the emotion aroused by an acknowledged awareness that others are suffering.
- The feeling depends on the ability inherent in humans to make a connection with others so as to be aware of their suffering.
- Compassion necessitates identification with the sufferer (empathy).
- Generally, felt compassion evokes: the desire to do something to relieve the sufferer

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Compassion & Wellbeing

- People who are altruistic, sociable and display empathy are consistently happier than others. People suffering from depression are generally self-absorbed, distrustful and focus defensively on their own needs (Seligman, 2002).
- “Volunteers are more likely than non-volunteers to perceive themselves as being in good health (Young & Glasgow, 1998). In fact, the health benefits of volunteering include reduced mortality risk (Harris & Thoresen, 2005; Musick, Herzog, & House, 1999; Oman, Thoresen, & McMahon, 1999) and less vulnerability to depression (Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Musick & Wilson, 2003; Wilson & Musick, 1999) and serious illness (Moen, Dempster-McClain, & Williams, 1992)” (Dillard, Schiavone, & Brown.)

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Forgiveness is not same as... (Enright and Coyle, 1998)

- **Condoning**: which involves justifying the offense;
- **Excusing**: which implies that a transgression was committed because of extenuating circumstances;
- **Forgetting** : which implies that the memory of a transgression has decayed or slipped out of conscious awareness;
- **Denial**: which implies an unwillingness or inability to perceive the harmful injuries that one has incurred.
- **Reconciliation**, a term that implies the restoration of a fractured relationship.

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What is Forgiveness?

Forgiveness may be defined according to its properties as a response, as a personality disposition, and as a characteristic of social units.

- “As a response, forgiveness may be understood as a prosocial change in a victim’s thoughts, emotions, and/or behaviors toward a blameworthy transgressor.
- “As a personality disposition, forgiveness may be understood as a propensity to forgive others across a wide variety of interpersonal circumstances.
- “As a quality of social units, forgiveness may be understood as an attribute that is similar to intimacy, trust, or commitment.”

McCullough & Witvliet, 2005, pp.448-449

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Forgiveness & Wellbeing

- Research evidence on the correlation between forgiveness and mental health and wellbeing is abundant (McCullough & Witvliet, 2005).
- Experience of forgiving others is associated to mental wellbeing (Reed & Enright, 2006) and physical health (Thoresen, Harris, & Luskin, 2000).
- The experience of being forgiven by God was related to fewer depressive and anxious symptoms (Exline, Yali, & Lobel, 1999).
- Interventions to facilitate forgiveness also show significant decrease in grief, anger, and anxiety after treatment (Coyle & Enright, 1997).

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