

Name: _____ Class: _____

Altruism: Why We Risk Our Own Well-Being to Help Others

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In this informational text, Kendra Cherry explores the various explanations for why people act in unselfish ways.

- [1] Everyone knows at least one of those people who are willing to jeopardize¹ their own health and well-being to help others. What is it that inspires these individuals to give their time, energy, and money for the betterment of others, even when they receive nothing tangible in return?

Defining Altruism

Altruism is the unselfish concern for other people; doing things simply out of a desire to help, not because you feel obligated to out of duty, loyalty, or religious reasons.



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Everyday life is filled with small acts of altruism, from the guy at the grocery store who kindly holds the door open as you rush in from the parking lot to the woman who gives twenty dollars to a homeless man.

News stories often focus on grander cases of altruism, such as a man who dives into an icy river to rescue a drowning stranger or a generous donor who gives thousands of dollars to a local charity. While we may be familiar with altruism, social psychologists are interested in understanding why it occurs. What inspires these acts of kindness? What motivates people to risk their own lives to save a complete stranger?

Prosocial Behavior and Altruism

- [5] Altruism is one aspect of what social psychologists refer to as prosocial behavior. Prosocial behavior refers to any action that benefits other people, no matter what the motive or how the giver benefits from the action. Remember, however, that pure altruism involves true selflessness. While all altruistic acts are prosocial, not all prosocial behaviors are completely altruistic. For example, we might help others for a variety of reasons such as guilt, obligation, duty, or even for rewards.

1. **Jeopardize (verb)** to put someone or something at risk

Theories for Why Altruism Exists

Psychologists have suggested a number of different explanations for why altruism exists, including:

Biological reasons. Kin selection is an evolutionary theory that proposes that people are more likely to help those who are blood relatives because it will increase the odds of gene transmission to future generations. The theory suggests that altruism towards close relatives occurs in order to ensure the continuation of shared genes. The more closely the individuals are related, the more likely people are to help.

Neurological reasons. Altruism activates reward centers in the brain. Neurobiologists have found that when engaged in an altruistic act, the pleasure centers of the brain become active.

Environmental reasons. A recent study at Stanford suggests that our interactions and relationships with others have a major influence on altruistic behavior.

[10] **Social norms.** Society's rules, norms, and expectations can also influence whether or not people engage in altruistic behavior. The norm of reciprocity, for example, is a social expectation in which we feel pressured to help others if they have already done something for us. For example, if your friend loaned you money for lunch a few weeks ago, you'll probably feel compelled to reciprocate when he asks if you if he can borrow \$100. He did something for you, now you feel obligated to do something in return.

Cognitive reasons. While the definition of altruism involves doing for others without reward, there may still be cognitive incentives that aren't obvious. For example, we might help others to relieve our own distress or because being kind to others upholds our view of ourselves as kind, empathetic² people.

Other cognitive explanations include:

Empathy. Researchers suggest that people are more likely to engage in altruistic behavior when they feel empathy for the person who is in distress, a suggestion known as the empathy-altruism hypothesis. Researchers have found that children tend to become more altruistic as their sense of empathy develops.

Helping relieves negative feelings. Other experts have proposed that altruistic acts help relieve the negative feelings created by observing someone else in distress, an idea referred to as the negative-state relief model. Essentially, seeing another person in trouble causes us to feel upset, distressed, or uncomfortable, so helping the person in trouble helps reduce these negative feelings.

Comparing the Theories

[15] The underlying reasons behind altruism, as well as the question of whether there is truly such a thing as "pure" altruism, are two issues hotly contested by social psychologists. Do we ever engage in helping others for truly altruistic reasons, or are there hidden benefits to ourselves that guide our altruistic behaviors?

2. **Empathetic** (*adjective*) showing the ability to understand or feel for others

Some social psychologists believe that while people do often behave altruistically for selfish reasons, true altruism is possible. Others have instead suggested that empathy for others is often guided by a desire to help yourself. Whatever the reasons behind it, our world would be a much sadder place without altruism.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement identifies the central idea of the text?
 - A. Behaving in a truly altruistic manner is an important part of being human; the reasons why people do it are less important.
 - B. Psychologists are unable to agree if true altruism exists, but they believe several factors could be encouraging people to act in seemingly selfless ways.
 - C. Psychologists have determined that true altruism doesn't exist because humans are compelled to always put themselves first.
 - D. Behaviors should be discussed in terms of their prosocial nature because psychologists still don't fully understand the nature of altruism.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Everyone knows at least one of those people who are willing to jeopardize their own health and well-being to help others." (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "News stories often focus on grander cases of altruism, such as a man who dives into an icy river to rescue a drowning stranger or a generous donor who gives thousands of dollars to a local charity." (Paragraph 4)
 - C. "Prosocial behavior refers to any action that benefits other people, no matter what the motive or how the giver benefits from the action." (Paragraph 5)
 - D. "Do we ever engage in helping others for truly altruistic reasons, or are there hidden benefits to ourselves that guide our altruistic behaviors?" (Paragraph 15)

3. Which of the following best captures the author's point of view on altruism in the text?
 - A. The author doesn't know the true reasoning behind altruism but thinks it's an important part of life nonetheless.
 - B. The author believes that it's more likely that people are motivated by their own selfishness rather than selflessness.
 - C. The author doesn't support psychologists' pessimistic views on altruism and thinks that people are in fact capable of true altruism.
 - D. The author believes that the social explanations for altruism are the most likely, rather the biological or neurological explanations.

4. How does the list of potential explanations for altruism contribute to our understanding of psychologists' views on the subject?
- A. The list of explanations emphasizes the variety of ways psychologists explain this behavior.
 - B. The list of explanations suggests that the cause of altruistic behavior is more likely biological than social.
 - C. The list of explanations supports the notion that the reason for altruistic behavior is unimportant as long as people are helping others.
 - D. The list of explanations proves that psychologists are getting close to discovering the one true cause for altruism.
5. What connection does the author draw between empathy and altruism?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Describe a time when you helped someone selflessly. What was your selfless act and what compelled you to do this? Do you think this was an example of true altruism? Why or why not?
2. In the text, the author discusses some psychologists' skepticism about true altruism. Do you think humans are capable of true altruism? Why or why not? If not, what do you think is the driving force for behaviors that appear altruistic?
3. In the text, the author discusses how we might be more compelled to behave altruistically towards our immediate family. Do you tend to be more altruistic towards your family than friends or strangers? What goes through your head when you decide to do something selfless for a family member?