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**Why we'll go an extra mile for our friends... and for the success of humans as a species**

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There could be hope, it seems, for the Me, Me, Me Generation.

When put to the test we are actually willing to do more for our friends than ourselves.

In an intriguing experiment, volunteers were asked to squat against a wall with their knees at right angles – a ski training exercise which becomes increasingly painful with time.

They were told to hold the position for as long as they could and paid 1p for every second they spent squatting.

The volunteers performed the exercise five times, once for themselves and four more times to win the money on the behalf of different colleagues.

In a result that paints a more altruistic picture of society than we might expect these days, they often endured more pain for their closest friends than for themselves.

The study’s author, Dr Freya Harrison, of Oxford University’s zoology department, said that while the numbers involved were small, there were lessons to be learned.

‘Of the 17 people involved, ten of them squatted longer for at least one of their recipients as for themselves and so there is something going on,’ she said.

‘Some people squatted twice as long for their closest link than for themselves.

‘I think that if our results hold in general and people really do go the extra mile for close friends, compared with when they invest effort for themselves, it points to the importance of co-operation in our species.

‘It suggests that maintaining social ties and working together has been an important factor in the success of humans as a species.’

So there is something in it for us, after all.

Previous research found people were unwilling to stick to the squat manoeuvre any longer for relatives than for themselves, suggesting we value friends over family.

Dr Harrison, whose research was published in the journal PLoS ONE, had an explanation for this as well.

‘Maybe that’s because friends are a lot more important in determining social benefits than relatives,’ she said.

‘Alternatively, it could be that the role of a relative doesn’t need working on because family members have genes in common already.

‘Perhaps we can rely on help from our parents or siblings because it’s almost always in our best interest to help someone who shares our genes.’

Dr Harrison, who did the study with colleagues from the University of Bath, now wants to look at how the phenomenon would play out in a more hierarchical organisation, such as the police or Army.

‘If you were low down the pecking order in the police, say, you would expect the fact that someone had power over you to cancel out friendships,’ she said.