

Commit acts of kindness

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To celebrate my 40th birthday last year I bought 40 soft pretzels and spent about 90 minutes handing them out to people I didn't know. I'd pull into a small business (auto body shop, insurance agency, jeweler, etc.), offer pretzels to everyone who worked there, and then drive to the next stop. It was exhilarating. And exhausting. Some people were completely skeptical and figuring I was trying to sell them something. I told one guy I was out spreading some joy and he responded, in the most serious and sad tone ever, "There is no joy here." I was so discouraged I almost drove home and ate the remaining 38 pretzels myself. But I pressed on.

At another place, people were overjoyed, completely surprised and bowled over by the fact that someone was handing out soft pretzels just to be nice. If you had overheard their remarks, you would have guessed I was handing them each \$100 bills instead of carbohydrate-laden wonders that cost less than 50 cents each. I'm pretty sure the positive vibe the small gift created lasted much of the day in that workplace. And that's exactly why I did it, just to insert a little positivity into the lives of those I encountered. It felt good. And that's because research has proven that being generous and willing to share makes people happy.

To quote Sonja Lyubomirsky in *The How of Happiness*, "Being kind and generous leads you to perceive others more positively and more charitably... and fosters a heightened sense of interdependence and cooperation in your social community. Doing kindness often relieves guilt, distress, or discomfort over others' difficulties and suffering and encourages a sense of awareness and appreciation for your own good fortune." She goes on to say, "Helping others or volunteering for a worthy cause highlights your abilities, resources, and expertise and gives you a feeling of control over your life." Any of you who have volunteered in the past know that the experience has been as meaningful to you as it was to the recipients of your time and talent, even if "feeling good" wasn't your intention.

An interesting side note is that in a study in which Lyubomirsky assigned participants to perform five acts of kindness per week over the course of six weeks, those who committed all five of their acts of kindness in a single day experienced a significant elevation in their happiness. So while it's a great idea to be kind on a daily basis, if you want to personally experience the most significant benefit from your own kindness, select a day in which this is a top focus.

Acts of kindness can be very small or very large or somewhere in-between. Here are a few small kindnesses I'm committing to:

- Help someone struggling with their groceries or other packages.
- Donate a dollar anytime I encounter a charity collection or sale.
- Offer a sincere compliment or smile to the cashier.
- Thank the service and cleaning staff at events.
- Let a car merge in front of me.

Opportunities for kindness abound. Do what works for you. And if you decide to drive around with soft pretzels, I hope you stop at my house. :)

