

Coping with Life's Transitions: What Is One Action that Will Help?

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Those who have read my articles or books are aware that during my career I have shifted from an intervention to a prevention perspective. My recent [April](#) and [May](#) 2024 columns were devoted to the important lesson housed in the Upstream Parable: it is far more effective to devote our time and energy to identifying and addressing the causes of a problem upstream than constantly and frantically attempting to cope with the problem once it has intensified downstream.

The benefits of adopting a prevention approach may seem obvious, but it is not always easy to achieve. In the upstream parable articles I described from personal experience how we (or an entire organization) can become captive to a downstream outlook, constantly expending an inordinate amount of time and energy putting out an existing conflagration rather than preventing the fire from emerging or intensifying. It is difficult to implement a prevention model when all of our efforts are directed at containing the existing fires.

A focus on events occurring upstream invites the question, “What can we do upstream to lessen or eliminate a problem from arising or strengthening?” In applying this question to the concept of resilience, we can ask, “What steps can we initiate to fortify our resilience so that we are better prepared to cope with challenges before they require a Herculean effort to manage?”

Reflecting on this last question many years ago prompted me to raise yet another question, “What are the mindsets and behaviors of resilient children and adults and how do they differ from their peers who are not resilient?” The more we can specify these differences, the more we can engage in activities that nurture resilience and our ability to confront problems.

The Benefits of Enriching the Lives of Others

One of the primary strategies I have advocated to nurture resilience is to engage in what my colleague Sam Goldstein and I have called “contributory” or “charitable” activities that involve enriching the lives of others. I have often stated that such activities add a sense of purpose and meaning to our lives, which is an essential feature of a resilient life at any age. Realizing the power of these activities led me to suggest to parents, teachers, and other caregivers that they provide opportunities for children to enhance the lives of others. I made

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similar recommendations to my adult patients and those who attended my workshops, asking them to consider ways in which they have improved the well-being of others or will do so in the future.

Given my strong interest in the impact of contributory behaviors, I was drawn to a recent article by [Leila Rosenberg posted on the *Greater Good Magazine*](#) website. It was titled “How Kindness May Help Students Transition to College.” Before reading the article, I thought it would examine the importance of kindness directed toward new students to support them as they began college. However, the brief abstract under the title revealed that I was mistaken in my initial assumption. It read, “A new study finds that students feel better in their first weeks of college the more they engage in kindness towards others.”

Being the recipient of an act of kindness during challenging times can be therapeutic; however, this article captured the belief that it is equally, if not more, therapeutic to assume the role of a provider of kindness. Rosenberg described her transition to college and the anxiety she experienced moving cross-country in 2020, when the pandemic was in full force and social distancing was required.

Rosenberg observed, “So I began my journey of connecting with people in my brand-new environment while still doing my best to maintain safety precautions. Before long, I realized that it was the little things that helped me feel more at peace in my home away from home. Holding doors open for people, complimenting cool hairstyles, and applauding fellow students for their input in class added up to not just more social connectivity for me but a genuine increase in my own happiness and satisfaction.”

The words “the little things” resonated with me. I have written about the lifelong influence of “seemingly small gestures,” often [referred to as “micromoments.”](#) This past January I described being the recipient of several small actions that occurred years ago, but their impact continues to this day. Given my experiences, it is not surprising that I frequently highlight the benefits of being both a provider or a recipient of these small, positive behaviors.

A Study of College Freshmen

Rosenberg reported that the results of a recent study led by graduate student Tiara Cash and faculty members Lara Aknin and Yuthika Girme, all in the Department of Psychology at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada, supported her experiences when transitioning to college. Rosenberg noted that Cash was motivated to conduct the study based on

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her struggles when she entered college and her desire to “understand the transition life cycle.” The results of the study were published in [*Social and Personality Psychology Compass*](#).

The introduction of the published article stated, “A growing body of research suggests that engaging in prosocial behavior can be beneficial to the helper’s well-being.” The authors then posed a question that I have often been asked: “Do the emotional benefits of prosociality remain during times of stress?” They answered, “Past research on ‘compassion fatigue’ and caregiving suggests they may not. Indeed, helpers can become overwhelmed and overtaxed assisting others under stress and over long periods of time.”

When I have been asked about the possibility of individuals “overdoing” the helper’s role and developing compassion fatigue, I have expressed that it is wise not to throw out the baby with the bath water. Research clearly indicates the benefits of engaging in contributory activities. What is required when helping others is to do so without exhausting ourselves physically and emotionally and leaving ourselves vulnerable to compassion fatigue. A similar caution is voiced by Cash: “However, other evidence suggests that engaging in more moderate levels of everyday kindness could be beneficial when handling stress.” Cash cited the findings of studies demonstrating that helping others mitigated stress and improved well-being, including during the pandemic. These findings support what is well-known, namely, that even beneficial acts can become harmful when done to an extreme.

Cash’s research involved 193 freshmen who answered a series of surveys weekly for six weeks. The surveys examined different features of well-being such as happiness, flourishing, resilience, optimism, anxiety, and loneliness as well as different actions, including sharing notes with a classmate, holding the door open for someone, doing favors without being asked, donating blood/care packages, and baking treats for friends. Cash observed, “Many of the prosocial items reflect what scholars have identified and studied as *random acts of kindness*, which consist of small and common kind gestures that typically require a minor personal cost or sacrifice.”

This study, headed by Cash, examined a number of variables that are beyond the scope of this article to review in detail. A comprehensive report of all of the findings can be found in the link to the article posted earlier. However, there are several key findings that I wish to highlight. Cash wrote, “Students reported greater psychological well-being in the weeks where they engaged in more prosociality than they typically do.” Interestingly, there were no differences in terms of well-being if the act of kindness involved interaction with other people (e.g., helping to

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carry someone's groceries) or were labeled as "solitary acts" (e.g., donating money for a particular cause).

Cash and her co-researchers asserted, "These findings challenge advice to focus on oneself during times of change and suggest that turning attention outward to helping others may offer an additional potential path to greater well-being during life transitions, such as the start of university. . . . The present work adds to the literature by demonstrating that people who engage in more small, daily acts of prosociality tend to experience well-being boosts during a personal, multi-faceted, and extended challenge. . . ."

The Relevance of "Self-Determination Theory"

I have often cited "Self-Determination Theory" (SDT) proposed by psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan in my work. Thus, I was pleased to see that Cash referred to SDT to explain possible reasons why prosocial actions resulted in increased well-being. Deci and Ryan believe that when certain basic needs are met, they reinforce intrinsic motivation and well-being. They identified three such needs: belonging/connectedness, competence, and self-determination. I've expressed that their work and writings indicate the presence of a fourth need, namely, the need to find purpose and meaning in our lives.

I have described the practice of helping others—the focus of Cash's research—as a major demonstration of this fourth need and have emphasized that the four needs often act in concert, reinforcing each other. Cash posited, "Given that generous acts offer one feasible, low-cost, self-initiated means of connecting with others, enacting choice, and exerting control, researchers can explore whether deficiencies in any one or combination of these basic needs is particularly powerful in promoting prosocial action."

Cash's research findings are in accord with many other studies that have shown the significance of engaging in contributory behaviors. While such behaviors are always essential, they may have even greater importance when we face heightened anxiety-producing events such as notable transitions in our lives. Cash focused on first-year college students, but the implications of her work are relevant for all age groups. Think of children entering kindergarten or middle school who are greeted during the first week or two of school with requests to help, whether by creating drawings that will be posted in the classroom or lobby or assisting their teachers with a certain project.

A Boy Entering First Grade

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I saw Peter, a six-year-old boy, in therapy. He had moved to a suburb of Boston at the beginning of the summer. He was prone to anxiety, which intensified with his move from another state. He told me during our first session that he was scared because he didn't know any of the other students who would be in his class. I spoke with the school principal, who scheduled to give Peter a tour of the school before the new school year began. Peter loved the tour and was excited by the principal's invitation to come in a week before the school year began to help water some plants in the main office and lobby. This very intuitive, empathic principal also asked another boy who was going to be in Peter's classroom to join in the activity. Peter's anxiety abated noticeably. He not only met another student before beginning school, but he also helped to make certain the "plants were healthy" (Peter's own words).

As I reflect upon studies such as those undertaken by Cash and of the many children and adults I've seen in therapy, I am reminded of a seemingly simple but powerful quote offered by the Dalai Lama: "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion."

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