

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

To Make Someone Happy, Ask for Help

Generosity is like the circulation of the blood, healthiest and best when it goes around and around.

Source: Arthur C. Brooks, *The Atlantic*, March 20, 2025

As a younger man, I had an elderly family member who was, on the face of it, extremely kind and generous. Whenever she visited, she brought a thoughtful gift; she was always eager to have you over for your favorite meal; if you were sick, she would be at your bedside with chicken soup. But she had the strange habit of never accepting any favors from others. It was a source of pride for her, in fact. “I give, but don’t take,” she said. “Not even a glass of water.”

And it was true: I never saw her accept a single kindness. Even in death, her generosity was a one-way valve. She left clear instructions that her body should be donated for medical science, and she would have no memorial service of any kind.

This is a pattern I have seen with some other people who pride themselves on their generosity, and perhaps you have too: all give, no take. One can only conclude that they think this practice adds to their virtuousness. But they’re wrong. An unwillingness or inability to accept kindnesses from others is a form of selfishness, because it appropriates for the giver all of the moral prestige of generosity while laying on the taker a sense of indebtedness, even obligation, that they have no way of paying off.

This makes giving a one-sided affair instead of what it is meant to be—a happiness-producing act of shared, mutual warmth. Learning how to receive gratefully from others is just as important, for your relationships and your own well-being, as being able to give generously.

Researchers have demonstrated the happiness effects of kindness in novel ways. For example, in one experiment, participants were instructed to engage in random virtuous acts toward strangers, such as holding a door open, feeding a parking meter, or presenting them with a small gift. Then the recipient’s reaction was assessed for whether or not they displayed a “Duchenne smile,” a facial expression involving the zygomatic major and orbicularis oculi muscles (in the upper cheeks and around the eyes) that is known to signify authentic happiness. Compared with strangers who did not receive these kindnesses, those who did were almost four times more likely to display such a genuinely happy smile.

The recipients of kindness weren’t the only ones who got happier; the givers did too. Immediately after the experiment, these participants reported higher positive moods, joviality, gratitude, optimism, and life satisfaction than beforehand. This is consistent with many other studies: For example, psychologists in 2004 found that when students were assigned to engage in five minor acts of kindness and sacrifice a week, the practice reliably raised their overall happiness levels compared with students who did not engage in these acts.

Logically, then, one way we can raise others’ well-being is by giving them opportunities to be kind and helpful. In a 2022 study in the journal *Psychological Science*, two researchers noted that people tend to be reluctant to ask a stranger for help—for example, asking to borrow their phone to make a call—because they assume this will inconvenience and annoy the person. However, as the scholars showed in their experiments, people who responded by helping proved more willing to assist, saw it as less trouble, and enjoyed more mood enhancement as a result than the asker had expected.

So one easy way to make someone happier is to accept their generosity, or even to ask them for a small favor. Indeed, some scholars believe that, because of the way this effect operates, the best way to get a big favor is by asking for a small one—to use a maxim quoted approvingly by Benjamin Franklin, “He that has once done you a kindness will be more ready to do you another, than he whom you yourself have obliged.” If a potential employer asks whether you want a cup of coffee, the right answer is “I’d love one!” whether you drink coffee or not.

But beware the tipping point. There’s legitimate asking for help and then there’s outrageous presumption of generosity. Once, someone I liked but barely knew called to ask a “small favor”: Could his family come and live in my house for two weeks? Ask for too much like this, or ask too often, and in the eyes of

your acquaintance you will go straight from Friendtown to Takerville. As scholars have noted, this is the point at which warmth turns to perceived exploitativeness. How you ask matters too. You should never demand something: Doing so is a mark of selfishness, which scholars have found among those who, without real justification, feel entitled or wronged.

Another way to spoil the warm glow that someone gets from doing you a kindness is by introducing extrinsic benefits, such as offering some kind of material quid pro quo. Imagine that I asked you to help me move a bunch of boxes out to my car. “Sure, happy to,” you might say—and mean it. Now, imagine I said, “If you help me take these boxes to my car, I’ll give you \$4.” All the better, right? Of course not: You’d probably be appalled, feel insulted, and think I was an idiot. Favors should be just that—favors.

Accepting kindnesses in a spirit of generosity promotes warm feelings between you and others. If this is hard for you, as it was for my elderly relative, a good place to start is simply to be alert to offers and resolve to accept them whenever possible. Obviously, this requires an ability to distinguish between true kindnesses and attempts at manipulation or coercion. You don’t have to agree to have dinner with a creep who you suspect has unsavory intentions. But “Can I grab you something from Starbucks?” is generally a good opportunity to say yes.

Your next step can be to turn a small favor like that into a healthy social pattern by reciprocating. A culture of generosity is like the circulation of blood: It can’t stop in one particular location. If it does, it coagulates and no longer supports life. Saying yes to kindnesses but never offering to be the giver means that the favors and goodwill will in the end dry up. Instead, look for opportunities to let others accept your generosity. Tomorrow, you be the one who runs to the coffee shop.

You can start the cycle with others by asking for something most people love to give. Years ago, when I was running a large nonprofit, a wise person with many years’ experience in the industry observed that I was surrounded by donors who had been wildly successful as entrepreneurs but I never asked them for business advice, which I could very much have used. When I adopted the practice of asking more, it improved my management, friendships, and my fundraising. The lesson? People loved giving me advice: It made them feel great and, as researchers have shown, probably also made me appear more competent to them. Whenever you’re puzzled by a tricky circumstance in life, love, or work, think of someone who might have a helpful perspective and ask them to share it. (Note: Just because you ask for advice, or can gratefully accept it if offered unbidden, doesn’t mean you have to take it.)

Once, in explaining the asking-as-giving principle to a class, a student stumped me by inquiring about how to apply it when someone appears to have truly nothing to give. A case that comes to mind is the homeless person who stops you on the street to ask for support or food: Is the dignity of giving simply unavailable to this person?

I took this question home with me and rolled it around in my head, because I didn’t have a ready answer. Then later that night, it occurred to me what a homeless person could give that would have true value for me. At the next opportunity, I tried it out.

After buying a man in the street food, before I turned to leave, I asked, “Will you, please, pray for me and my family?” His face initially registered shock at my request, but he readily agreed to it. I happen to believe, as many religions teach, that God hears the cries of the poor—so I consider that I got a great deal more than I gave that day. You don’t need to share my religious beliefs to understand, I’m sure, how the exchange gave me an opportunity to show the warm respect from accepting a kindness that every person needs and deserves.

Possible Response Questions

- What are your thoughts about the act of accepting kindnesses? Explain.
- Did something in the article surprise you? Discuss.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a “move” made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.