



STAR Initiative

## **“Lean on Me”: Why Prosocial Behavior is Important**

*Lean on me, when you're not strong  
And I'll be your friend  
I'll help you carry on  
For it won't be long  
'Til I'm gonna need  
Somebody to lean on*

*~ “Lean on Me” by Bill Withers*

Growing up, my friends and I would walk around the neighborhood for quite literally hours, talking, stopping for a quick game of basketball, and singing. When I could convince my friends to sing with me, at least half of the time it was the song “Lean on Me.” What I loved about “Lean on Me” – besides the chance to really belt out the refrain – was the chance/excuse/hope to remind my friends that I was there for them if they needed me. Its hard to imagine what adolescence would have been like without that song. We did lean on one another and I was grateful to be there for friends during dark times.

Perhaps now, more than ever in this time of pandemic-level stress, thinking of others and supporting others is incredibly powerful. Over the years, numerous studies have shown that helping others is associated with positive mental health outcomes for the “giver” of support, of kindness (Curry et al 2018); these positive benefits to the giver appear to be across gender, age, and outcome. A recent study of daily, real world, stresses found that “prosocial behavior” (kindness, support, collaboration) helped to decrease the negative effects of stress on emotional well-being (Raposa et al 2016). Indeed, the researchers found that on a given day prosocial behaviors decreased the otherwise harmful effects of stress on positive affect, negative affect, and overall mental health. In other words, by helping others during times of stress, we may actually be helping ourselves!

When I’ve shared this research in my class on Resilience, students have sometimes wondered if this is actually better explained by personality or temperament. Maybe nice people just are happier and more resilient during stress. Or maybe nicer people are able to create better support networks that can be resources during stress. Or maybe nicer people choose work and social environments that are less stressful or more supportive during stress. A recent research study randomized individuals in the workplace for four weeks to Givers (who engaged in five acts of kindness toward Receivers), Receivers, and Controls (Chancellor et al 2018). In the short *and* long term, both Givers and Receivers benefitted in terms of competence, autonomy, happiness, and satisfaction. AND those who received acts of kindness paid these acts forward

with 278% more prosocial behaviors than those in the comparison group. The fact that these findings occurred in a workplace where people were assigned to groups, rather than behaving according to their personality, supports the idea that the benefits of giving to individuals and communities can be developed even if it was not a natural approach to daily life.

In my clinical life, I've watched how activities encouraging "giving" are often the most powerful tools in therapy. Activities involving giving to others fit nicely into a wide range of intervention approaches and can be considered to be a wonderful part of behavioral activation (positive activities), mindfulness (compassion), and dialectical behavioral therapy (distress tolerance contributing activities). I've seen this work firsthand in everything from volunteering at a local animal shelter to organizing donations for a disaster hit community to trying to engage in little acts of kindness toward friends or family each week. Now, as we are all spread so thin, this does not need to be something big. It could be a text message to a friend to let them know we care or a silly pic that we know will make them smile. Or even just taking a minute to notice and thank the people in your life that you might not have thanked recently.

When I learned that Bill Withers had died (March 30, 2020), as our entire world was struggling to cope with COVID-19, I played the song for my child. It had been too long since I'd really listened to that song. Later that night, as I sang it to myself, I could see the fireflies and smell the fresh cut grass at the spot where my friends and I would look up at the stars and sing. Amazing how a song can do that. Especially a song about the power of giving, of supporting, of being there for others.

*For it won't be long  
'Til I'm gonna need  
Somebody to lean on*

#### To Learn More:

- Chancellor, J., Margolis, S., Jacobs Bao, K., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2018). Everyday prosociality in the workplace: The reinforcing benefits of giving, getting, and glimpsing. *Emotion, 18*(4), 507.
- Curry, O. S., Rowland, L. A., Van Lissa, C. J., Zlotowitz, S., McAlaney, J., & Whitehouse, H. (2018). Happy to help? A systematic review and meta-analysis of the effects of performing acts of kindness on the well-being of the actor. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 76*, 320-329.
- Raposa, E. B., Laws, H. B., & Ansell, E. B. (2016). Prosocial behavior mitigates the negative effects of stress in everyday life. *Clinical Psychological Science, 4*(4), 691-698.

Nicole Nugent, PhD is a clinical psychologist in Providence, Rhode Island, where her research at Brown Medical School is focused on understanding stress and trauma to develop better interventions and where her clinical work at Hasbro Children's Hospital serves refugee youth. Dr. Nugent is an Associate Director for the STAR Initiative.