

Cooperation can be contagious particularly when people see the benefit for others

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Seeing someone do something good for someone else motivates witnesses to perform their own helpful acts, an insight that could help drive cooperative behavior in communities navigating through the health

crisis.

In a new study, psychology researchers at The University of Texas at Austin confirmed that people can be heavily influenced by others, especially when it comes to taking on [prosocial behavior](#)—actions designed to benefit society as a whole. Understanding this is important now, when large-scale cooperation and adoption of protective behaviors—wearing [face masks](#) and avoiding gatherings—have important implications for the well-being of entire communities, the researchers said.

"Just like the [deadly virus](#), [cooperative behavior](#) can also be transmitted across people," said Haesung (Annie) Jung, who led the study while earning a Ph.D. at UT Austin. "These findings remind the public that their [behavior](#) can impact what others around do; and the more individuals cooperate to stop the spread of the disease, the more likely others nearby will do the same."

Reviewing the evidence from decades of studies, the researchers found that exposing people to "prosocial models"—watching someone perform an act of kindness—elicited some subsequent helpful acts. This response was partly driven by "goal contagion," researchers said, whereby witnessing prosocial actions lead people to adopt the underlying goal associated with the observed behavior, such as caring for others' well-being.

"We found that people can readily improvise new forms of prosocial actions. They engaged in behaviors that were different from what they witnessed and extended help to different targets in need than those helped by the prosocial model," said Jung, who is now a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The magnitude of this type of influence varied across societies, with

Asian countries most likely to be influenced by modeling, followed by European countries, then North American.

They also found that people were more motivated to help after witnessing other people benefit from the prosocial model than when they benefitted from the prosocial act. This shows that the effect triggered by adopting others' prosocial goals outweighed other potential motives triggered by self-benefit, such as doing it because they felt grateful.

The researchers suggested that adopting this type of framework could go a long way in influencing new prosocial behaviors amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"Many people may choose to avoid social distancing practices because they don't think they're likely to contract the virus or experience serious symptoms. So, one of the best things we can do is frame recommended practices as prosocial actions," said Marlene Henderson, associate professor of psychology at UT Austin. "By thinking of recommended practices as prosocial behavior, modeling then becomes a powerful tool for encouraging others to engage in such practices.

More information: Haesung Jung et al, Prosocial modeling: A meta-analytic review and synthesis., *Psychological Bulletin* (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/bul0000235](https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000235)

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