

# What are the benefits of prosocial behaviour?

## Background

Prosocial behaviours are defined as voluntary acts motivated by a concern for the welfare or benefit of others (Hui et al., [2020](#); Keltner et al., [2014](#)). They encompass a broad spectrum of actions, from informal helping (e.g., cooking meals, household chores; Einolf et al., [2016](#)) to everyday social behaviours such as greeting others and checking in on friends (Sandstrom & Dunn, [2014b](#)). While human beings are naturally prosocial and collaborative, some may wonder what the impact of these behaviours is on mental and social health.

## Purpose

The purpose of this brief is to explore the benefits of prosocial behaviour on wellbeing and examine why some people engage in more or fewer everyday prosocial behaviours than others (such as greeting and checking in on others). In defining prosocial behaviour, we consider both minimal social interactions as well as more explicit forms of prosociality. In exploring the factors influencing prosocial behaviour, we focus on the most proximal influences, including key personality traits which have widely been studied as predictors of human behaviour.

## Evidence from Existing Studies

### ***What are The Benefits of Prosocial Behaviour?***

A strong and growing body of evidence suggests engaging in prosocial behaviours not only benefits the recipient but could also offer numerous health and well-being benefits to the giver (Nakamura et al., [2023a](#), [2023b](#), [2023c](#); Lanser & Eisenberger, [2023](#)). Much of this research has focused on smaller acts of kindness such as “bringing someone a beverage” or “emailing a thank you note” (Chancellor et al., [2018](#)). A systematic review and meta-analysis suggests that acts of kindness benefit the well-being of the actor ( $\delta = 0.28$ ), with a small-to-medium effect size comparable to other positive psychology interventions (e.g., mindfulness; Curry et al., [2018](#)). One study identified increases in positive emotions as a mechanism for the beneficial effects of acts of kindness on well-being (Nelson et al., [2016](#)). Similarly, another study found that helping others led to great momentary feelings that produce happiness and a stronger sense of meaning than other positive activities (e.g., being kind to oneself; Regan et al., [2022](#)).

Beyond these general effects of prosociality on wellbeing, prosocial behaviour has also been observed to reduce loneliness (Lee et al., [2023](#)). Furthermore, lonely people, have been shown to engage in fewer prosocial behaviours – even when loneliness is induced experimentally (Lee et al., [2017](#); Twenge et al., [2007](#)). Given these bi-directional effects, it seems that prosocial behaviours and loneliness may be inversely related – meaning prosocial behaviours may be a good strategy for reducing loneliness. Multiple mechanisms likely contribute to the loneliness-reducing effects of prosocial behaviour. Among these, prosocial behaviours often directly involve social interaction (Fritz et al., [2023](#)) – which can help individuals practice social

interactions and thereby correct cognitive biases that might reinforce loneliness (such as the perception that one is unlikeable or somehow socially deficient or that interactions with others are aversive or unfulfilling; Whillans et al., [2017](#)). Additionally, individuals who engage in prosocial behaviour may experience reputational benefits (e.g., the esteem of others) for their actions – which can help transform not only their beliefs about themselves (e.g., perceived social status) but also how others engage with them (e.g., reciprocity; Berman & Silver, [2022](#); Carpenter & Myers, [2010](#)). Such benefits are critical motivators for prosocial behaviour (Sigmund et al., [2001](#)) and reinforce the idea that prosocial behaviours have a direct effect in promoting a sense of belonging and inclusion. Furthermore, prosocial behaviours may help people overcome maladaptive social cognitions rooted in their self-doubts (e.g., fear of rejection, social anxiety) by helping them to shift their attentional focus towards others (Spithoven et al., [2017](#); Gardner et al., [2025](#)). Working together, various effects may directly counter the key mechanisms by which loneliness is maintained (Lee et al., [2017](#), [2022](#); Lam et al., [2021](#); Cacoppo et al., [2016](#); Hawkey et al., [2013](#); Hawkey & Cacioppo, [2011](#)).

In addition to the benefits of explicitly prosocial behaviour, minimal social interactions, which engender reciprocity and connectedness, have also been shown to improve wellbeing (Ascigil et al., [2023](#); Van Lange & Columbus, [2021](#); Gunaydin et al., [2020](#)) – perhaps due to their loneliness-reducing effects (Ishiguro, [2023](#)). These behaviours include simple prosocial acts such as greeting others or engaging in short conversations (Fritz et al., [2023](#)). These interactions are often focused on “weak ties”: relationships that involve infrequent contact, low emotional intensity, and limited intimacy, such as those with classmates or service workers (Sandstrom & Dunn, [2014b](#)). Below are a few key studies demonstrating these benefits:

- A field experiment by Sandstrom et al. ([2014a](#)) found that participants who initiated a social interaction with their barista had an increased sense of belonging, as well as decreased negative emotion and increased positive emotion.
- A second set of studies by Sandstrom et al. ([2014b](#)) found this association in students as well, who experienced greater happiness and feelings of belonging on days when they interacted with classmates more than usual.
- Furthermore, a set of studies by Gul et al. ([2021](#)) found that commuters who engaged in minimal social interactions with their shuttle drivers (e.g., thanking, greeting, expressing good wishes) experienced greater positive emotion and life satisfaction.

These and other studies demonstrate that human beings benefit from being prosocial and engaging with others – even when these engagements are very brief or with people who you do not know well.

### ***Why Are the Barriers to Engaging in Prosocial Behaviours?***

While prosocial acts may come naturally (Warneken et al., [2006](#); Rossi et al., [2023](#)), not all people engage in prosocial behavior regularly (Abel et al., [2022](#)). This is partly because contemporary life is often structured to induce isolation and interpersonal distance through, for example, fear of imposition generated by individualistic cultures (Fox, [2021](#)), private living and work spaces (Epley & Schroeder, [2014](#)), insufficient public transportation options (Osth et al., [2018](#)), lack of third places (Finlay et al., [2019](#)), and the decline of institutional social capital



(Nyquist et al., [2016](#)). Additionally, for more formal acts of kindness or helping behaviours, the time cost for these activities is one potential concern. However, more informal acts of prosociality, such as greeting others, can have very little time cost. Still, people worry about their abilities to carry on a conversation that others will find enjoyable, and whether their conversational partner will like them – but these fears are found to be vastly overblown (Sandstrom & Boothby, [2021](#)). Likewise, in terms of reaching out to others, people are often concerned about how others will respond. In reality, people tend to underestimate how positively others respond to social outreach (Epley et al., [2022](#)). For example, a set of experiments in both field and laboratory settings suggested that those who perform acts of kindness systematically underestimate the positive impact they have on recipients (Kumar & Epley, [2023](#)). These are important considerations, given that when people assume that others will not respond positively to their attempts to provide support, they are more reluctant provide support at all (Dungan et al., [2022](#)).

In addition to and compounding the effects of these other factors, personality traits may also be important in shaping patterns of engagement in prosocial behaviour. The most widely used measure of personality is the Big-Five Model, which organizes traits across five dimensions: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience (McCrae & John, [1992](#)) and has widely been demonstrated to have reliably strong explanatory power (Bainbridge et al., [2022](#)). Prior research on personality traits has identified links between some personality traits and prosocial behaviours, though evidence is mixed. Further, personality traits have the potential to be modifiable—engaging in prosocial behaviours may lead to changes in personality traits, or vice versa. Below is a summary of evidence examining the role of each Big Five personality trait with prosociality:

- **Agreeableness:** Agreeableness is generally defined as being higher in altruism, caring, and support (McCrae & John, [1992](#)). Of the five central dimensions in the Big Five model, the strongest and most consistent evidence has been found for agreeableness as a predictor of prosociality, with a meta-analysis finding a small but robust effect such that higher agreeableness was linked to higher prosociality ( $r = 0.16$ ) (Kline et al., [2019](#)). This was true across adolescents ( $r = 0.44$  in males,  $r = 0.28$  in females) (Caprara et al., [2010](#)), ( $r = 0.27$ ) (Tariq & Naqvi, [2020](#)), as well as young adults ( $r = 0.44$  in males,  $r = 0.54$  in females) (Caprara et al., [2012](#)). Agreeableness was also cross-sectionally associated with prosociality towards both strangers ( $r = 0.24$ ) and friends ( $r = 0.31$ ) (Sun et al., [2019](#)).
- **Conscientiousness:** Those high in conscientiousness are thought to be diligent and well-organized (McCrae & John, [1992](#)). Some evidence has also supported a cross-sectional association between higher conscientiousness and greater prosociality in adolescents ( $r = 0.25$ ) (Tariq & Naqvi, [2020](#)).
- **Openness:** While there is less consensus in defining openness, those high in this trait are generally thought to have wide interests and are more open to new experiences and values (McCrae & John, [1992](#)). Less research has examined openness as a predictor, but a meta-analysis identified strong evidence that greater openness can predict increased prosocial behaviour, with a small but robust effect ( $r = 0.23$ ) (Kline et al., [2019](#)). Further, some evidence has also supported a cross-sectional association between higher openness and greater prosociality in adolescents ( $r = 0.15$ ) (Tariq & Naqvi, [2020](#)).



- **Emotional stability:** Emotional stability, also known as the opposite of neuroticism, captures people's tendency to experience distress, with those high in emotional stability described as more calm and even-tempered (McCrae & John, 1992). Evidence of emotional stability as a predictor of prosociality is mixed: meta-analyses found no evidence linking this trait to prosocial behaviour (Kline et al., 2019; Thielmann et al., 2020), but one study of adolescents did identify an association between neuroticism (low emotional stability) and prosociality, such that low emotional stability was linked with decreased prosociality ( $r = -0.29$ ) (Tariq & Naqvi, 2020).
- **Extraversion:** Extraversion is defined as being more talkative and social, compared to introverts, who are more reserved and quiet (McCrae & John, 1992). Again, evidence of extraversion as a predictor of more prosociality is mixed: meta-analyses found no evidence linking higher extraversion to prosocial behaviour (Kline et al., 2019; Thielmann et al., 2020), but one cross-sectional study of adolescents did identify a positive association between extraversion and prosociality ( $r = 0.27$ ) (Tariq & Naqvi, 2020).

Taken together, it is clear that prosocial behaviour is inhibited by a wide variety of individual, situational, and socio-structural factors (Oishi et al., 2007).

## Analyses from the Canadian Social Connection Survey

To investigate both the predictors and well-being benefits of prosociality, we used data from the 2021 and 2022 Canadian Social Connection Surveys. In doing so, we focused primarily on two forms of prosocial, but minimal social interactions: greeting others and checking-in. These outcomes were measured by items asking participants how often in the past 3 months they had (1) greeted a stranger, neighbor or acquaintance (e.g., by saying hello or good morning), and (2) sent a text/private message to someone just to check in. Response options included: not in the past three months, less than monthly, monthly, a few times a month, weekly, a few times a week, and daily or almost daily, and were analyzed on a continuous scale.

As a first step in this analysis, we looked at associations between our exposures (personality traits) at T1 (2021) and our outcomes (greeting and checking in behaviours) at T2 (2022). Openness ( $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $p = 0.04$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ), extraversion ( $\beta = 0.10$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ), and emotional stability ( $\beta = 0.23$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ) were positively predictive of greeting, but conscientiousness and agreeableness were not. Similarly, openness ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ), conscientiousness ( $\beta = 0.21$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ), extraversion ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ), agreeableness ( $\beta = 0.21$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ), and emotional stability ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ) were positively predictive of checking in. Summarizing these results, there were important differences in who was more likely to engage in greeting and checking in. People with higher openness and extraversion may be more willing to engage in interactions with strangers and friends, while those with greater emotional stability may have fewer worries about others' perceptions of their actions, which could lead to greater engagement in both greeting and checking in. Those higher in conscientiousness may be more likely to check in on their friends, given they are more concerned about being diligent, organized, and fulfilling obligations to others. Likewise, those higher in agreeableness have a greater concern for maintaining interpersonal relationships, which may make them more likely to check in with others.



Building on these analyses, we examined associations between greeting/checking in at Time 1 and health and psychological well-being outcomes (including physical health, mental health, life satisfaction) and social outcomes (loneliness) at Time 2, controlling for personality traits. Results of these analyses showed that greeting positively predicted physical health ( $\beta = 0.09$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ) and life satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.11$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ), but not mental health. The association between greeting and loneliness did not meet the traditional cutoff for statistical significance; descriptively, however, there was a trend such that more greeting was associated with less loneliness ( $\beta = -0.07$ ,  $p = 0.08$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ). Checking in was associated with decreased loneliness ( $\beta = -0.10$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ), but not physical health, mental health, or life satisfaction.

## Discussion

In considering the literature and analyses presented above, it is evident that prosocial behaviours can benefit both the givers and receivers of such acts. Importantly, that this is true of even small, everyday prosocial acts such as greeting others and checking in with friends and family. Indeed, our analyses, in line with previous findings (Hui et al., [2020](#); Kahana et al., [2013](#)), showed that these small acts were linked to benefits across various domains of well-being – though were themselves shaped by contextual factors, such as personality traits. Given these findings, future studies should incorporate real-time data collection methods, such as daily diaries, and broaden the scope of examined acts to capture the nuances of these minor yet impactful behaviors more comprehensively and situate them within people’s broader social lives and experiences.

## Conclusion

Based on the available evidence and our analyses of the Canadian Social Connection Survey, we recommend initiatives by organizations to highlight ways in which people can engage in simple yet impactful prosocial behaviours in their everyday lives, such as greeting and checking in on others. Furthermore, our findings on personality traits offer valuable insights when considering how to encourage prosociality across a range of individual differences that may impact people’s willingness to engage in these behaviours. Finally, we should promote these behaviours by informing people that not only are their prosocial actions appreciated by others more than they think, but they can also benefit their own well-being while building a more socially connected society.

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