

8 compassion sig abstracts, january '12

(Adams, Santo et al. 2011; de Haan, Dekovic et al. 2011; Aydin, Krueger et al. 2012; Blazer 2012; Gray 2012; Inagaki and Eisenberger 2012; McEwan, Gilbert et al. 2012; Sbarra, Smith et al. 2012)

Adams, R. E., J. B. Santo, et al. (2011). "The presence of a best friend buffers the effects of negative experiences." *Dev Psychol* **47**(6): 1786-1791. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21895364>.

The goal of the current study was to examine how the presence of a best friend might serve as protection against the effect of negative experiences on global self-worth and the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical axis (HPA axis). A total of 103 English-speaking male (n = 55) and female (n = 48) participants from Grade 5 (M = 10.27 years) and Grade 6 (M = 11.30 years) completed booklets about their experiences that occurred 20 min previously and how they felt about themselves at the moment, and they provided saliva multiple times per day over the course of 4 consecutive days. Having a best friend present during an experience significantly buffered the effect of the negativity of the experience on cortisol and global self-worth. When a best friend was not present, there was a significant increase in cortisol and a significant decrease in global self-worth as the negativity of the experience increased. When a best friend was present, there was less change in cortisol and global self-worth due to the negativity of the experience.

Aydin, N., J. I. Krueger, et al. (2012). "'Man's best friend:' How the presence of a dog reduces mental distress after social exclusion." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* **48**(1): 446-449. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022103111002411>.

A substantial amount of research shows that social exclusion is a threat to mental health. In the research reported here, we tested the hypothesis that the presence of a companion animal can serve as a buffer against these adverse effects. In a controlled laboratory experiment, we found that only socially excluded participants who did not work in the presence of a dog reported lower mental well-being compared with socially excluded participants who performed in the presence of a dog and participants who were not socially excluded. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Blazer, D. (2012). "Religion/spirituality and depression: What can we learn from empirical studies?" *American Journal of Psychiatry* **169**(1): 10-12. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2011.11091407>.

(Free full text editorial): In this issue, Miller and colleagues present data from a longitudinal study of offspring from a sample of depressed and nondepressed subjects to determine if religion or spirituality influenced the onset and course of major depression over the 10 years of follow-up. They found, among individuals who affiliated as either Protestant or Catholic, that subjects who reported religion or spirituality as highly important were 76% less likely to experience an episode of major depression during the follow-up. In contrast, religious attendance and denomination had no impact. The protective effect was experienced primarily among subjects at high risk because their parents experienced depression. Though this study is the first long-term outcome study on the impact of religion or spirituality on the emergence of depression, it confirms a growing literature, including a previous study by the authors, that generally supports the benefit of religion or spirituality (usually religious participation) in decreasing the frequency and recurrence of depressive disorders. Studies to date have suggested three conclusions, all of which can be debated: 1) individuals with no religious affiliation are at greater risk for depressive symptoms and disorders, 2) people involved in their faith communities may be at reduced risk for depression, and 3) private religious activities and beliefs are not strongly related to risk for depression. Depression has been the most frequently studied of the psychiatric disorders in relationship to religion or spirituality, in large part because of the overlap in expression of both. For example, guilt associated with depression often is connected with a religious belief system, and apparent depressive symptoms (such as the "dark night of the soul") are associated with religious experiences.

de Haan, A. D., M. Dekovic, et al. (2011). "Longitudinal impact of parental and adolescent personality on parenting." *J Pers Soc Psychol* **Vol 102**(1): 189-199. <http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/psp/102/1/189/>.

This study provides a test of how personality may shape social behaviors in a long-lasting dyad: the parent-adolescent relationship. In a large Belgian community sample, it was examined which parent Big Five characteristics were related to parenting and whether adolescent Big Five characteristics elicited certain parenting behaviors. Further, the proposition that individual differences are amplified under stress was examined by exploring whether parent personality was differentially related to parenting for parents of "easy" versus "difficult" adolescents. Moreover, possible differences in associations across parental and adolescent gender were explored. Mothers (N = 467) and fathers (N = 428) reported on their personality using the Five-Factor Personality Inventory; adolescents (N = 475) assessed their personality with the Hierarchical Personality Inventory for Children. Two types of parenting behaviors, overreactive discipline and warmth, were assessed 2 years later by parent self-reports, partner reports, and adolescent reports, from which multi-informant latent factors were created. Results indicate that parental personality was more relevant than adolescent personality for explaining overreactivity, but parent and adolescent personality were similarly relevant in explaining warmth. Especially parental and adolescent Agreeableness and adolescent Extraversion were important predictors of both types of parenting. Associations between parental personality and parenting were similarly related to parents of easy versus difficult adolescents, and for mothers and fathers parenting daughters or sons. Together, results show that parent characteristics as well as adolescent characteristics importantly affect dysfunctional and adaptive parenting.

Gray, K. (2012). "The power of good intentions: Perceived benevolence soothes pain, increases pleasure, and improves taste." *Social psychological and personality science*. <http://spp.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/01/16/1948550611433470.abstract>.

The experience of physical stimuli would seem to depend primarily on their physical characteristics—chocolate tastes good, getting slapped hurts, and snuggling is pleasurable. This research examined, however, whether physical experience is influenced by the interpersonal context in which stimuli occur. Specifically, three studies examined whether perceiving benevolent intentions behind stimuli can improve their experience. Experiment 1 tested whether benevolently intended shocks hurt less, Experiment 2 tested whether benevolently intended massages were more pleasurable, and Experiment 3 tested whether benevolently intended candy tastes sweeter. The results confirm that good intentions—even misguided ones—can soothe pain, increase pleasure, and make things taste better. More broadly, these studies suggest that basic physical experience depends upon how we perceive the minds of others. *Medical Xpress* - <http://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-01-good-intentions-ease-pain-pleasure.html> - comments "A nurse's tender loving care really does ease the pain of a medical procedure, and grandma's cookies really do taste better, if we perceive them to be made with love - suggests newly published research by a University of Maryland psychologist. The findings have many real-world applications, including in medicine, relationships, parenting and business. "The way we read another persons intentions changes our physical experience of the world," says UMD Assistant Professor Kurt Gray, author of "The Power of Good Intentions," newly published online ahead of print in the journal

Social Psychological and Personality Science. Gray directs the Maryland Mind Perception and Morality Lab. "The results confirm that good intentions - even misguided ones - can sooth pain, increase pleasure and make things taste better," the study concludes. It describes the ability of benevolence to improve physical experience as a "vindication for the power of good." While it seems clear that good and evil intentions can change the experience of social events - think of a reaction to a mean-spirited, cutting remark compared to gentle teasing spoken with a smile - this study shows that physical events are influenced by the perceived contents of another person's mind."It seems we also use the intentions of others as a guide for basic physical experience," Gray writes in the journal. **SPECIFIC FINDINGS** The power of good intentions to shape physical experience was demonstrated in three separate experiments: the first examined pain, the second examined pleasure, and the third examined the taste of a sweet treat. **PAIN: EXPERIMENT 1.** Does kindness reduce pain? Three groups of participants received identical electric shocks at the hand of a partner. Members of the first group were in the "accidental" condition: They thought they were being shocked without their partner's awareness. The second, or "malicious condition, group thought they were being shocked on purpose, for no good reason. The final group ("benevolent" condition), also thought they were being shocked on purpose, but because another person was trying to help them win money. The result: Participants in the "benevolent" group experienced significantly less pain than both the "malicious" and "accident" participants. This finding should "provide relief to doctors and even those caring parents who are sometimes compelled to inflict pain on their charges for their [charges] own good," Gray writes in the paper. **PLEASURE: EXPERIMENT 2.** Do good intentions also heighten the experience of pleasure? People sat on an electric massage pad in an easy chair which was repeatedly turned on - either by an indifferent computer or a caring partner. Although the massages were identical, Gray found that partner massages caused significantly more pleasure than those administered by a computer. "Although computers may be more efficient than humans at many things, pleasure is still better coming from another person," the study concludes. **TASTE: EXPERIMENT 3.** Does benevolence improve how things taste? Subjects were given candy in a package with a note attached. For the benevolent group, the note read: "I picked this just for you. Hope it makes you happy. The non-benevolent (indifferent) version read: "Whatever. I just don't care. I just picked it randomly." The candy not only tasted better to the benevolent group, but it also tasted significantly sweeter. "Perceived benevolence not only improves the experience of pain and pleasure, but can also make things taste better," the study concludes. **APPLICATIONS** The findings of these studies suggest clear applications. For example, the first experiment suggests that medical personal should make sure to brush up on their bedside manner. "How painful people find medical procedures depends in part upon the perceived intentions of the person administering it," says Gray. "Getting blood taken from stony-faced nurse hurts more than from an empathic one." For those in relationships, which is pretty much everyone, the message is to make sure your partner, sibling, friend, etc. knows you care. Gray notes, "It's not enough just to do good things for your partner - they have to know you want them to feel good. Just imagine saying, 'fine, here's your stupid hug,' - hardly comforting." The same would also seem to apply to cooking, where emphasizing your concern about the experience of the diners makes things taste better. Relatedly, these results also apply to business strategy. "It's no surprise," says Gray, "that food companies always pair their products with kindly old grandfathers and smiling mothers - thinking of this make believe benevolence likely increases our enjoyment." The study also suggests the general benefits of thinking that others mean well - including God. "Painful events attributed to a benevolent God should seem to hurt less than those attributed to a vengeful God, says Gray. "To the extent that we view others as benevolent instead of malicious, the harms they inflict upon us should hurt less, and the good things they do for us should cause more pleasure," the paper concludes. "Stolen parking places cut less deep and home-cooked meals taste better when we think well of others."

Inagaki, T. K. and N. I. Eisenberger (2012). "Neural correlates of giving support to a loved one." *Psychosomatic Medicine* **74**(1): 3-7. <http://www.psychosomaticmedicine.org/content/74/1/3.abstract>.

Objective Social support may benefit mental and physical well-being, but most research has focused on the receipt, rather than the provision, of social support. We explored the potentially beneficial effects of support giving by examining the neural substrates of giving support to a loved one. We focused on a priori regions of interest in the ventral striatum and septal area (SA) because of their role in maternal caregiving behavior in animals. Methods Twenty romantic couples completed a functional magnetic resonance imaging session in which the female partner underwent a scan while her partner stood just outside the scanner and received unpleasant electric shocks. Results Support giving (holding a partner's arm while they experienced physical pain), compared with other control conditions, led to significantly more activity in the ventral striatum, a reward-related region also involved in maternal behavior (p values $< .05$). Similar effects were observed for the SA, a region involved in both maternal behavior and fear attenuation. Greater activity in each of these regions during support giving was associated with greater self-reported support giving effectiveness and social connection (r values = 0.55–0.64, p values $< .05$). In addition, in line with the SA's role in fear attenuation (presumably to facilitate caregiving during stress), increased SA activity during support giving was associated with reduced left ($r = -0.44$, $p < .05$) and right ($r = -0.42$, $p < .05$) amygdala activity. Conclusions Results suggest that support giving may be beneficial not only for the receiver but also for the giver. Implications for the possible stress-reducing effects of support giving are discussed.

McEwan, K., P. Gilbert, et al. (2012). "An exploration of competitiveness and caring in relation to psychopathology." *Br J Clin Psychol* **51**(1): 19-36. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22268539>.

Objectives. Social mentality theory outlines how specialist systems have evolved to facilitate different types of social behaviour such as caring for offspring, forming alliances, and competing for resources. This research explored how different types of self-experience are linked to the different social mentalities of competitive social ranking (focusing on gaining and defending one's social position/status/rank) in contrast to caring (being helpful to others). Perceived low social rank (with feelings of being inferior and unfavourable social comparison, SC) has been linked to depression, but a caring sense of self has less so. We hypothesized therefore that depression, in both clinical and non-clinical populations, would be primarily linked to competitive and rank focused sense of self rather than a caring sense of self. Method. Students ($N = 312$) and patients with depression ($N = 48$) completed self-report scales measuring: self-experience related to competitiveness and caring; social rank; social safeness; and depression, anxiety, and stress. Results. The data suggest that in students, and particularly in patients, competitiveness (and feeling unsuccessful in competing for resources) is strongly associated with depression. Although caring shares a small correlation with depression in students, and with depression, anxiety, and stress in patients, when controlling for the rank variable of submissive behaviour this relationship ceases to be significant. Submissive behaviour was found to be a full mediator between caring and depression. We also found that how safe and comfortable one feels in one's social relationships (social safeness), was a full mediator between competitiveness and depression. So, it is the feeling of being unable to compete where one does not feel secure in one's social environment that is particularly linked to depression. Conclusion. The results of this study suggest that self-experience is complex and multifaceted and is linked to different social roles that are socially contextualized. In addition, perceived low social rank and perceived failures in being able to 'attract' others and compete for social resources, are strongly linked to depression, whereas experiencing oneself as caring and helpful is not when submissiveness is controlled for.

Sbarra, D. A., H. L. Smith, et al. (2012). "When leaving your ex, love yourself." *Psychological Science*.
<http://pss.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/01/26/0956797611429466.abstract>.

Divorce is a highly stressful event, and much remains to be learned about the factors that promote psychological resilience when marriages come to an end. In this study, divorcing adults (N = 109) completed a 4-min stream-of-consciousness recording about their marital separation at an initial laboratory visit. Four judges rated the degree to which participants exhibited self-compassion (defined by self-kindness, an awareness of one's place in shared humanity, and emotional equanimity) in their recordings. Judges evidenced considerable agreement in their ratings of participants' self-compassion, and these ratings demonstrated strong predictive utility: Higher levels of self-compassion at the initial visit were associated with less divorce-related emotional intrusion into daily life at the start of the study, and this effect persisted up to 9 months later. These effects held when we accounted for a number of competing predictors. Self-compassion is a modifiable variable, and if our findings can be replicated, they may have implications for improving the lives of divorcing adults.