

What's in it for me?

We're surrounded by misery, crime and selfishness – so why should we even bother being nice? **Tim Arthur** finds that a charitable act can be just as beneficial to the do-gooder as the do-goodee

Altruistic acts are an ego boost

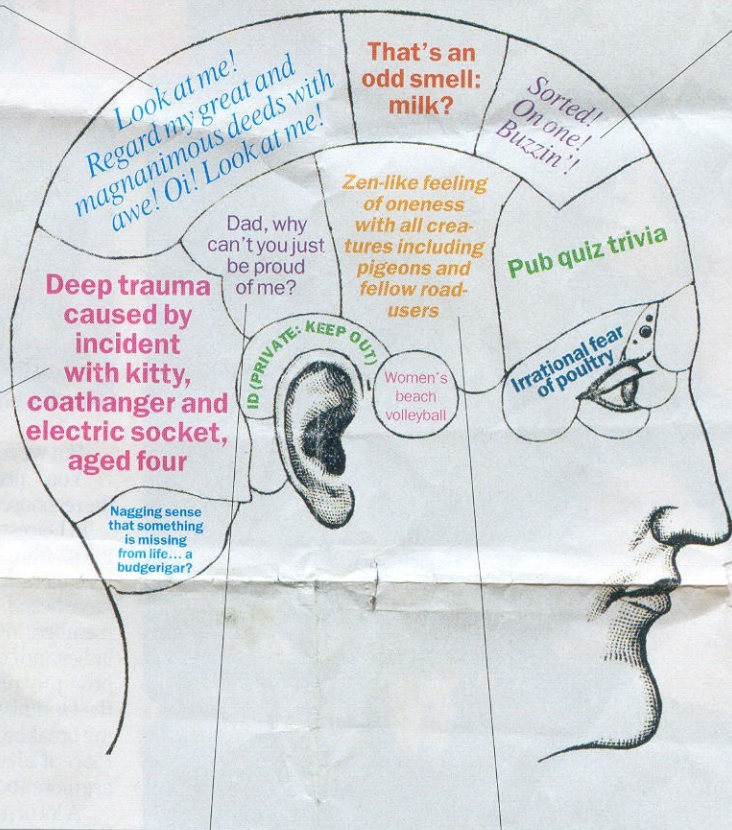
'Only great souls know the grandeur that is in charity,' said the French bishop and orator Jacques-Bégnine Bossuet – a man whose middle name was, literally, benign – in the seventeenth century. Is that why, despite today's pervasive violence and our **'me, me, me' culture**, some people persist in carrying out extraordinary acts of kindness every day, all around us?

Good deeds can heal you psychologically

One possibility which chimes surprisingly well with a culture of self-involvement is that helping others is actually good for you. In his book 'The Healing Power of Doing Good: The Health and Spiritual Benefits of Helping Others', Allan Luks claimed that his research demonstrated not only that **helping others actively promotes good health in the helper**, but that it can diminish the effects of physical and psychological illnesses.

Helping others boosts your self-esteem and immune system

Duke University Medical Centre in North Carolina found that recovering heart attack patients who sat and chatted with current patients recovered more than 60 per cent faster than those who didn't. At Harvard, meanwhile, a study suggested that **just watching others carry out charitable acts can get your immune system going**. The beneficial side-effects of being kind may include the reduction of stress-related problems such as ulcers and depression and an increase in feelings of joyfulness, emotional resilience and self-worth.



Reciprocal altruism, or the 'helper's high'

Help others and help ourselves at the same time – it's a wonder more of us aren't running around doing good. And that's without taking into account **'reciprocal altruism'**: doing good deeds in the hope that, somewhere down the line, someone might return the favour. 'I like to think that if I ever thought things were so bad I couldn't go on, there'd be someone at the end of the phone to talk to,' says Katie, a Samaritan for the past four years. 'And if I'm feeling low, bizarrely, I do feel better after a shift. There's that warm feeling after a good call where you know you've helped change someone's life.'

This is the **'helper's high'**: mild euphoria from endorphins released by performing an act of kindness. Perhaps this explains the health benefits of charitable behaviour. At any rate, whether you want to help others or just give yourself a boost, it seems you can't do better than doing good.

Everything we do affects other people

So says Nick Futcher, Oxfam's brand manager. 'The global challenges of climate change and food shortages remind us that we're all in this together.' If, as Futcher believes, most of us harbour 'a nugget of sanity which drives us to help others', it would explain why **doing good makes us feel good** – in the healthy and in the smiley sense. And, of course, helping others makes them feel better too. 'In simple terms,' says Tom Andrews, chief executive of People United, an organisation dedicated to nurturing kindness, 'helping somebody makes them happier, and therefore more likely to help someone else.'