

# MAPP Alumni Magazine

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Alumni

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## THE 7 HABITS OF HAPPY PEOPLE — NUMBER TWO: ACTS OF KINDNESS

**Cultivate kindness.** People who volunteer or simply care for others on a consistent basis seem to be happier and less depressed. Although “caring” can involve volunteering as part of an organized group or club, it can be as simple as reaching out to a colleague or classmate who looks lonely or is struggling with an issue.

The top line: People who care for others’ well-being through acts of altruism, volunteering, or formation of communal relationships seem to be happier and less depressed. This seems to be especially true in older individuals.

Most people who care for others in a selfless manner do so because of a genuine desire to help and improve the world around them. Nonetheless, modern psychological research has shown that caring has benefits for all involved; people who volunteer or care for others on a consistent basis tend to have better psychological well-being, including fewer depressive symptoms and higher life satisfaction. Caring behavior even has physiological benefits, as current research shows that individuals who receive social support (a form of caring behavior) are more protected from disease and even death (e.g., Broadhead et al., 1983).



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## KINDNESS continued



Although “caring” can involve volunteering as part of an organized group or club, it can also be as simple as reaching out to a workmate or classmate who looks lonely or is struggling with an issue. Studies show that people who reach out like this can benefit in multiple ways. Some individuals care for others through acts of altruism and organized volunteering, while others prefer monetary donations and engagement in communal relationships. The majority of studies agree that there is a significant association between caring for others’ well-being and increased positive effect.

Several studies have found that this correlation appears to be highest in older adults who participate in volunteer activities (Morrow-Howell, et al., 2003; Wheeler et al., 1998).

The same level of correlation has not been found in younger adults as a whole. Yet, a subgroup of younger adults who engage in sustained volunteering over long periods of time do in fact have higher levels of psychological well-being (Wheeler et al., 1998). The authors of this study speculated that many young adults who volunteer for short periods of time may have been encouraged to volunteer by their schools or did so to boost their chances of getting into college. In contrast, older volunteers tend to cite moral responsibility. This suggests that “intrinsically motivated” volunteers, i.e. those who are more motivated for the sake of volunteering itself, feel more satisfaction than “extrinsically motivated” volunteers (Midlarsky, Kahana, 1993).

One more intriguing set of data reveals that the recipients of volunteer activities who were encouraged to participate or cooperate in some way, tended to experience greater happiness. In contrast to this, those who passively received the benefits did not become significantly happier, and in some cases became more depressed. As is true for other areas of research, it is considerably more difficult to prove that volunteering causes improved mental well-being than to simply identify an association between the two. At least one study, however, has attempted to do the former with a prospective, randomized trial (Yuen et al., 2008). The authors of this study randomly assigned a population of older adults into one of two groups: a group that volunteered for three months, and a control group that did not. At the end of the trial, the researchers found that those who volunteered scored higher on indices of mental well-being than those who did not. These effects persisted three months after the end of the trial, indicating that the benefits of volunteering may be long-lasting.

While volunteering is a heavily-cited example of caring behavior, current psychological research strives to understand the factors that drive certain individuals to be more caring than others. Do individuals with a highly-altruistic family tend to care more for the well-being of others? Or, could feelings of elevation, induced by witnessing another person do a good deed, motivate helping behavior? More broadly, how do cultural practices and beliefs influence caring behavior? The answers to these questions suggest that caring behavior is

largely context-dependent, where social influences heavily influence how individuals care for each other’s well-being. For example, a 2001 study sought to understand the how cultural contexts influenced the caring behavior of British and Taiwanese college students. Results show that caring behavior manifests differently in cultures that value independence over interdependence and vice versa, where a balance of the two values leads to greatest levels of well-being.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Jordan Silberman  
MAPP 2006

## Find Your Why

*And other creative solutions for a healthy life*

by Jim Rink

As a concert pianist performing at Carnegie Hall in New York City, Jordan Silberman (M.D., Ph.D., MAPP 2006) understood the equation: People come to hear beautiful music, they enjoy the music, express their appreciation, maybe there is an encore, then they slowly slip away and head home.

In his second career, where he leads clinical and behavioral science initiatives focused on diabetes, obesity, hypertension and other chronic conditions, the tune has changed. In this case, people come to be healed, and beautiful music may be soothing, but is not a cure. When it comes to leading a healthier lifestyle, as the saying goes, the spirit may be willing, but the flesh is often weak. That's where Dr. Silberman steps in with a different set of skills, a different equation.

As head of Cardiometabolic at Vida Health, his interests include scalable interventions for health behavior change, healthcare communication, health literacy and the neurobiology of self-control.

"You can administer interventions to large groups," said Silberman, "but the amount of resources do not increase linearly. If you increase the number of patients by 1,000, the amount of resources needed increases by a factor of 10. We've got tens of millions of patients in the U.S. who need to make behavior changes to stay healthy. You can't have a one-on-one coach for everyone."

Part of the "Holy Grail," said Silberman, is scalability, and optimizing allocation of limited resources like health coaches. For programs to be both scalable and effective, you need to use high-touch resources like coaches for the right people at the right times—and avoid allocating those resources in a manner that won't change outcomes.

### **OPTIMIZE YOUR ENVIRONMENT**

To find what works you often have to look at what doesn't work. One popular method — let's say for eating healthy vs unhealthy foods — is delayed gratification. You eat salad all day long, telling yourself you can have a candy bar later at night. According to Silberman, this approach sets yourself up for failure. Most patients overestimate their abilities, their willpower.

A better approach, said Silberman, focuses on environmental optimization. Make the healthy choice easier to acquire and the unhealthy choice harder to acquire; e.g., move unhealthy snacks to the basement (under lock and key?) and put all healthy foods at eye level.

### **FIND YOUR WHY**

Another area of promising research involves the self-determination paradigm, said Silberman. Why do people want to diet, exercise, etc.? What motivates them? Once you discover this, you may find the key for sustained behavior change over the long-term.

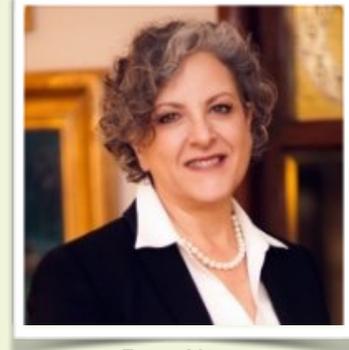
For example, as a theoretical diabetes patient, you may want to ask yourself, "Why do I want to manage my diabetes better?" Different people have different motivations: ...to see my grandkids grow up ...to improve my physical appearance ...to run in a marathon. These motivations can be revisited over time to reinforce healthy behavior and keep it on track.

One thing is for certain, over the course of several successful careers, Dr. Jordan Silberman has found his why, and that is music to our ears.



## WHAT'S EMPATHY GOT TO DO WITH IT?

by Frawn Morgan, MAPP 2017



Frawn Morgan

In her iconic song *What's Love Got To Do With It?* Tina Turner questions why we need the emotion of love. The song lyrics argue love is a "second hand emotion," and only confuses those who experience it. The song scrutinizes the purpose of love, which often exposes us to pain, resulting in the question of love's necessity. The same could be said for empathy. What is empathy and why do we need it? If empathy is innate – if we are born with a sense of empathy - it must have a purpose, but what is that purpose?

Empathy is often compared to compassion, but it is psychologically distinct. Compassion is caring for someone else, as opposed to empathy's feeling someone else's pain; consequently, compassion is more objective. With the more socially useful compassion at our disposal, has empathy become a second hand emotion, much like love in Turner's song? While compassion may play a more useful role in society, empathy is a necessary element in the personal relationships that are the foundation of our humanity.

It might be easy to think that as we have evolved, and our sense of compassion has become more useable and more useful, our need for empathy could become extinct. Empathy is a gut-level reaction, an impulse, which can overpower us if not controlled<sup>2</sup>. Our sense of empathy is innate; evolution has equipped us with both empathy and compassion. If evolution has equipped us with empathy, it must be good for something! Empathy must serve a purpose to further the species, either by protecting us from some harm or causing us to continue to improve.

Empathy dissolves boundaries between people by creating a sense of shared feelings, allowing us to feel what others feel<sup>2</sup>. In this sense, empathy can enhance personal relationships by causing us to more closely relate to someone else's situation. This relating, however, results in partiality, or a sense of bias toward others due to our feeling what they are feeling. When our significant other is feeling down, we likely feel at least a measure of those depressed feelings. When a child has been harmed by others, or bullied at school, the parents often get angry and want to retaliate. These shared feelings create a sense of distress in the empathetic person, although such distress is both acceptable and necessary when protecting those inside one's familial circle. However, when a social worker feels empathy for the children in her case load, she feels empathic (or vicarious) distress and her sense of impartiality, and with it her judgment, can suffer<sup>3</sup>. This distress can also interfere with pro-social behavior, resulting in poor decisions where the overall social group is concerned.

Researchers have argued that empathy is unreliable as a guide for moral behavior, going so far as to imply empathy can be a liability, especially when considering actions which should be condemned<sup>4</sup>. He argues that the partiality of empathy can lead us to endorse reckless, unsustainable social programs when a more reasoned approach would be more sustainable, and therefore more useful. Using empathy as a guide can expose us to "moral mistakes" and "profound errors"<sup>4</sup>. In fact, empathetic pleas can result in feelings of aggression. Studies have shown that people can become quite aggressive, more so than their normal personality, when exposed to the suffering of strangers<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>Written by Terry Britten and Graham Lyle; recorded by Turner and released in 1984. The song ranked #309 on *Rolling Stone* magazine's list of "The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time". It also ranked #38 on the *Songs of the Century*.

<sup>3</sup>Bloom, P. (2013). *Just babies: The origins of good and evil*. New York, NY: Broadway Books.

<sup>4</sup>Bloom, P. (2015, September 25). The dark side of empathy. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2015/09/the-violence-of-empathy/407155/>

The fact that empathy can have this effect with respect to the suffering of strangers is where social distortion sets in. While useful in personal settings, the empathic response sets us up for very dangerous mistakes when that response is taken outside the personal relationship. Employing empathy, therefore, should be avoided in social or political situations due to its ability to manipulate the heart and mind<sup>3</sup>.

If empathy is not to be our guide for social and political situations, what should be? How can we be caring in social situations without using empathy as our guide? How can we make intelligent and responsible political decisions without identifying with the impact of those decisions on the people they will affect?

While empathy and compassion are not necessary elements of each other, they often stand in for each other, however compassion can be a more appropriate motivator of helping behaviors<sup>4</sup>. Compassion can be labeled empathic concern<sup>5</sup>. Further, compassion is a feeling for the other that does not include sharing the suffering of the other, and these feelings are shown to be associated with pro-social behavior<sup>6</sup>. In this way, compassion serves to drive our desires to enhance the well-being of others, whether those others are disadvantaged youths in our own neighborhoods or people suffering at the hands of marauders in distant lands. Whereas empathy is a vicarious emotion, compassion is not<sup>4</sup>. This gives compassion an edge in motivating pro-social behavior. It can be impartial, where empathy is not. Compassion is not subject to manipulation the way empathy is. Compassion, by its very nature, does not distort judgment the way empathy does<sup>3,4</sup>. Compassion can cause us not only to feel concern for the suffering of others, it can also motivate us to help others<sup>6</sup>, unlike empathy.

Instead of using the suffering of distant others to pluck at our empathic heart strings and drive aggressive social and political policy, we should employ compassion to care about others without the empathic distress and its resultant distortion. In this way, we can understand the plight of others and investigate how to change the systems that result in their plight. Compassion allows us to be more utilitarian in our response. By using compassion as a guide for our political decisions, we are forced to consider all aspects of a decision, not just the emotional aspect. In creating new social policy, we would then weigh the cost against the proposed benefit, as opposed to being focused only on the existing situation. We might find that the proposed program is unsustainable, and realize that starting and then stopping that program could be worse than doing nothing. This realization could result in finding better, more sustainable, responses to society's problems. Compassion allows us to understand the systems that result in social problems, whereas empathy demands action irrespective of these systems. Compassion allows us to use our intelligence, as well as our emotion, to find solutions.



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<sup>5</sup>Prinz, J. (2011). Against empathy. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy, Spindel Supplement*, 49, 214-233. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2011.00069.x>

<sup>6</sup>Jordan, M. R., Amir, D., & Bloom, P. (in press). Are empathy and concern psychologically distinct? *Emotion*, <http://dx.doi.org/dx.doi.org/10.1037/emo0000228>

As we reflect on Turner's question, "What's love got to do with it?" we may ask the same question of empathy in our modern times: What does empathy have to do with it? Do we really need this emotion any longer? Empathy causes us to be insensitive to those who we have not identified with and to those that are different than ourselves. The bias created by empathy can cause us to desire harsh punishments when we know or identify with a victim, even though the punishment may be inconsistent with the crime or other punishments in similar situations<sup>7</sup>. When we do overcome our natural empathic tendencies to biased attitudes favoring those we know, it can still distort our judgment to the point of spurring us to commit warlike acts against others who are not our immediate aggressors. The bottom line is that empathy distorts our judgment and the greater the stakes of the issue we are facing, the greater the impact of that distortion<sup>3</sup>.

The perspective presented here identifies compassion as greatly superior to empathy, especially for situations involving society as a whole. Compassion allows us to act from our higher selves, rather than react from our more base selves. Compassion is much more useful to the group than is empathy.

In the end, however, as with the emotion of love in Turner's song, we still need empathy. Based on the research I have explored in this paper, empathy is a critical component of our humanness. Empathy is what makes relationships work, and grow, and be fulfilling. Empathy helps parents bond to and protect their children and helps siblings bond to and protect each other. Empathy helps strengthen the bond of the in-group. Empathy is, in many ways, an extension of the love emotion Turner was questioning; yet neither love nor empathy are second-hand emotions. Just like love, we, as humans who are biologically wired for connection, need empathy.

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<sup>7</sup>Singer, T., & Klinecki, O. M. (2014, September 22). Empathy and compassion. *Current Biology*, 24(18). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2014.06.054>

<sup>8</sup>Bloom 2014

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Frawn Morgan researches well-being; specifically how fostering well-being in working mothers can improve the working mother experience, the mother-child relationship, and build emotional health and well-being in children, building protection against adolescent depression.



# POSITIVE EMOTION IN MOTION RESEARCH FROM FITDANCE

by Elaine O'Brien, MAPP 2008

Movement practices are vital to our whole being. Our body, carriage (how we hold our body), and how we move are integral to how we think, feel, and act at every age and stage of our lives.

Having a keen kinetic understanding helps us to overcome obstacles to self-knowledge, and encourages us to see ourselves more clearly. An increased awareness of our body in space (proprioception)—created with just a minor tweak in alignment, can completely change how we look and feel. Amy Cuddy spoke of this phenomenon in her TED Talk on “power posing.” The integrity of our postural form and movement contribute significantly to our physical and mental health.

My recent research investigated active, older, youthful women who had been participating in a community movement program, FitDance, twice weekly for between five and 19 years. The threefold purposes of the study were:

1. To present active, vibrant, functionally fit female participants, ages 71 to 81, as positive role models of motivation, self-determination, and program adherence
2. To look at the FitDance model and mechanisms for uplifting mental and physical wellness
3. To examine how a sustainable, positive community was built through a social fitness model.

This aerobic dance/exercise program incorporated cardiovascular, strength, flexibility, balance, agility, coordination, and the “fun factor” into a one-hour dance/exercise program. The class was rooted in appreciative practices, positive psychology, sports medicine, ballroom dance, and performance training, and the goals of the program were to promote vibrant aging, social connections, and well-being. Participants unanimously reported that the FitDance community was a place where they felt welcomed, positively engaged, challenged, sincerely praised, and connected to fellow participants and the community. The study was triangulated; in surveys, adult children of the participants substantiated the mothers’ vibrancy, commitment to training, sense of social support, and program satisfaction.

One graceful student, who had been attending for 16 years, said, “Motion is lotion. Our bodies are meant to move.” She has been living with type-1 diabetes for 52 years, and stays physically active to support her health; in addition to attending FitDance classes, she cycles, distance walks, practices tai chi, and “power gardens,” beautifying her town and surroundings.

Another participant, who had been attending the program for 19 years, since retiring in 1997, stated: “This class is not only an exercise of the body but also of the mind. You feel ALIVE. And, the closeness of the classmates is phenomenal. We are a team effort for staying vital, stimulated, friendly, and helpful.”

From another participant: “We receive a great workout, one that all attending can do ... We all feel good about ourselves, that we are still cool and ‘with it’ girls. When you are older, it seems you forget so much about yourself; so many years taking care of others.”

FitDance framed older adulthood as a time of potential, wisdom, and growth, beyond frailty and infirmity. The self-determined participants and their children reported that FitDance was a positive influence on their lives, families, and communities.



Based on the research and the SPIRE model, here are five thoughts to inSPIRE positive emotion in motion:

**1) Spiritual:** Move with intention and appreciation. Consider the miracle of your being, where your body begins and ends in space. Consider moving more, and well, as a gift of love to yourself, and others, Volunteer. All the research participants donated time during the week: teaching Latin or Tai Chi, delivering Holy Communion, driving people to doctor's appointments, cuddling low-birthweight babies at the hospital. Move in nature.

**2. Physical:** Build your somatic understanding and power. Realize the relationship of the somatopsychic (how the body affects the mind) as well as the psychosomatic (how the mind and our beliefs affect the body). Listen to your body, and practice good form and safety techniques. Build progression in practicing new movement, and consider intensity, duration, and frequency, so you end your exercise feeling successful, and good. Enjoy a variety of movement and activities.

**3. Intellectual:** Aerobic exercise boosts learning. Burgeoning research continues to reveal the power of cardiovascular exercise, and how it increases neurogenesis, strengthening our brain. An early foundation of neural health will help protect us from cognitive decline in later years. Revel in growing your kinesthetic intelligence.

**4. Relational:** Training together in a supportive group, or with a reliable partner, is a great way to increase your motivation, exercise adherence, and build friendships. Social support in training often leads to deeper personal relationships, as movement has a tendency to help us unlock emotions. We can get in touch on a richer level, sharing triumphs and sorrows. I power-walked/ran the Dublin (Ireland) Marathon one year with a local community team, "Joints in Motion," to support the Arthritis Foundation. This adventure led me to meet wonderful people, get into great shape, and support an important cause during a rough patch in my life.

**4. Emotional:** Listen to music you enjoy, exploring different rhythms. Find music that helps you move. Practice self-care; build a better understanding of yourself and others. Manage your energy and get to know your circadian rhythms. Put down the electronics and look at people you love, making eye contact. Move, dance, laugh, and play together.



#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Elaine O'Brien, Ph.D., MAPP, CAPP, CPT is an positive educator, trainer, program designer, producer, writer, presenter, and pioneer in Health/ Fitness Promotion, Positive Aging, Positive Exercise, and in the Art and Science of Positive Psychology and Human Movement. Elaine is Creative Director/CEO of Lifestyle Medicine Coaching & Training, a consultancy, and FitDance: Move2Love, delivering positive community/group exercise programming, and training protocols to help boost exercise safety/standards, motivation, adherence, enjoyment, whole health and well being across the domains of life.



Scott Asalone

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

### *A Call to Arms*

By Scott Asalone, MAPP 2008

After a week of seeing partisan politics, nationalistic leanings and selfish ambition in the United States I thought I'd feel better by reading about what is happening globally. I was hoping for some good news but now I am really depressed. When did the world turn so selfish, nationalistic, and nasty? Now is the time that positive psychology is needed more than ever and as practitioners, we need to be front and center in offering an alternative to the spiteful, self-centered leanings and help people care about others again.

There are two areas where we are needed. First, we have to embrace all of the victims and perpetrators of this global march toward selfishness and self-centeredness. Yes, our arms have to reach out to both sides, so they see an alternative that can change the world for good and allow them to flourish. We need to be non-partisan in helping others to heal and find effective ways of living that go beyond the entrapments of a "me" or "my side" culture. We know that we can affect that change through our work in organizations and communities, with families and individuals. But now is the time we need to be even more fervent in our application before there is a tipping point from which it will be more difficult to return.

Positive psychology offers, not just a way of healing or flourishing, but a different way of living. It promotes the care and concern for others; of justice and well-being for all. This is not a therapy to be applied, but a way to heal the world, if only we reach out, embrace others, and bring them to this safe place.

Additionally, the second area of need is our own well-being. MAPPsters and those who try to practice and apply positive psychology are in danger. It is easy to either succumb to the constant attacks of those who would divide us or to wear ourselves out in our effort to stem the tide of selfishness. That is why we must also embrace each other and care for each other. There is a saying in hospice that "no one cares for the care-takers." We must be vigilant to reach out to our members, whether we think they are in need or not, and make sure we are holding, nurturing and loving all of those who are working so hard to spread positive psychology. It is easy to burn out, but to "burn on" requires a caring and fueling of the flame. That happens when MAPPsters gather, whether at Fete and Summit or even chance meetings in airports. The connection occurs when discussing topics on a webinar, or exchanging good news on Facebook. We need to ensure our community of the support it needs to change the world.

Yes this is a call to arms... to reach out, to embrace, to touch. Now, more than ever, we need to share and live positive psychology. Because the world needs to be reminded of what it is to be fully human and fully alive.

– Scott

