

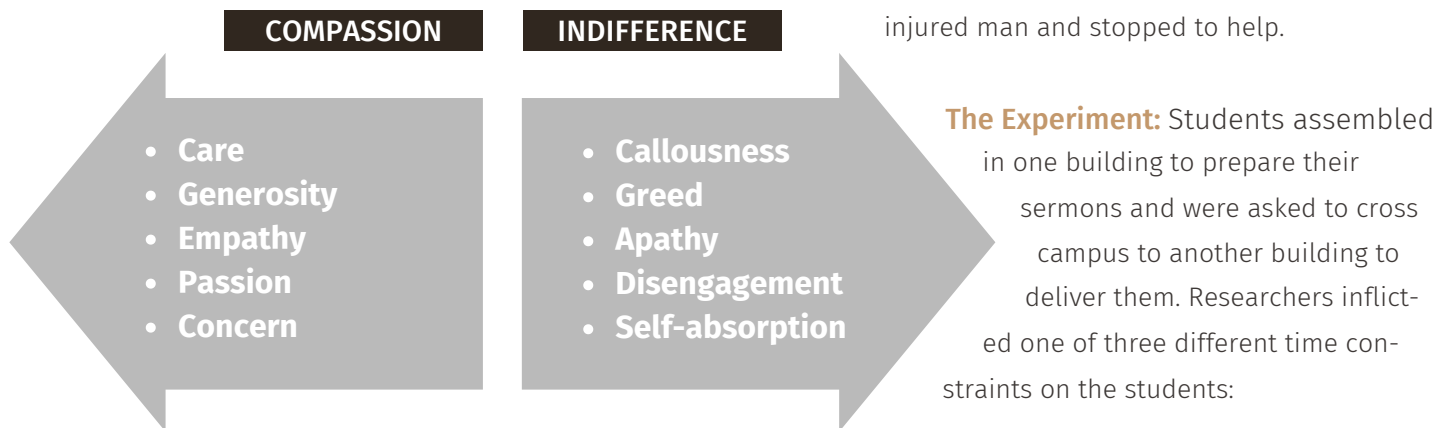
Busyness Versus Compassion

Did you know that when you spend time helping others, especially those less fortunate than you, you're more likely to have good health, better employment options, and stronger families? People who volunteer generally report their life changes for the better, while those who receive support are better able to cope with life's challenges and even recover from significant illness more fully than those who lack support. You could even say that it's in your own self-interest to be compassionate, as altruistic people receive more favors from others. When you give often, you receive often.

But don't just take our word for it. Research in neuroscience has proven that compassion has its benefits. When we give, the area of our brain associated with positive feelings activates, lighting up the screen of an MRI scan. Acts of compassion encourage a more positive perspective, reduce stress, and increase satisfaction, as well as helping us impact others for the better. When we're out to get one another, our stress soars and relationships cannot flourish. When we look out for each other, the stress of extreme competitiveness dissolves, and we can better work together.

The Sample: Princeton divinity students—as pro-compassion as you can get.

The Study: The divinity students were told to craft a sermon based on the Good Samaritan that would be evaluated by their supervisors. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, a traveler is stripped of clothing, beaten and left half dead on the side of the road. Religious leaders saw the stranger but avoided him because they had things to do, while a Samaritan saw the injured man and stopped to help.



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If compassion is so beneficial, why is it so hard? That's because even the most compassionate among us faces an especially fierce competitor – busyness. In the 1970s, psychologists John M. Darley and C. Daniel Batson of Princeton wanted to understand how time pressure impacted acts of compassion.¹ Here's what they found.

- 1. High hurry—** “You're late! Hurry! They were expecting you a few minutes ago.”
- 2. Medium hurry—** “They're ready for you. Please go right over.”
- 3. Low hurry—** “It will be a few minutes before they're ready for you, but you may as well head over. You shouldn't have to wait long.”

The Result: On the way to deliver their Good Samaritan sermons, students came across a victim (one of the researchers) slouched, coughing, and clearly in need of help. Of students in the high hurry group, only 10 percent stopped to help the victim. Students in the medium hurry group did better, with 45 percent stopping to help. The best results came from the low hurry group, where 64 percent of students stopped.

The Conclusion: If divinity students on their way to give a sermon about helping others won't stop to help the afflicted, what chance do the rest of us have? It might be easy to draw the conclusion from this study that human beings are selfish, disregarding the needs of those around them. But the true moral of the story is this: even good people who are thinking good thoughts will walk right past those in need if they are in a hurry.



1 Darley, J. M., & Batson, C. D. (1973). "From Jerusalem to Jericho: A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 27 (1), 100–108.