



Manifesto Musing

Our Brains on Altruism

Altruism is a big word for a simple, very human impulse: helping someone else without expecting anything in return. It's a cousin of kindness and caring, but not quite the same. Kindness is often about warmth in action – offering a smile, holding the door, sharing a meal. Caring can be ongoing – tending to a friend through illness, raising a child, looking after your community. Altruism overlaps with both, but it's specifically about acting for another person's benefit, even when there's no obvious reward for you.

It turns out, our brains love altruism. Neuroscience research has shown that when we help others, the brain's reward system lights up – much like it does when we enjoy good food or listen to our favourite music. Acts of altruism can release feel-good chemicals like dopamine and oxytocin, which boost our mood, reduce stress, and strengthen our sense of connection. In one study, even thinking about giving activated these reward centres, suggesting that our brains are wired to value generosity.

This isn't surprising when you think about our history. As humans, we've always survived – and thrived – in groups. We are a caring species. Sharing resources, looking out for one another, and stepping in when someone needs help are not just moral ideals – they're part of what's kept us going for thousands of years.

The good news is that altruism doesn't need to be grand or exhausting. It can be as small as carrying a neighbour's shopping in from the car, sending a "thinking of you" text, or letting someone go ahead of you in traffic. These acts are not just "nice things to do" – they're tiny reinforcements of the social glue that holds us together. And often, they're as good for our wellbeing as they are for the person on the receiving end.

So, here's a light-hearted challenge for the week ahead: choose one small act of altruism and do it without fanfare. Don't announce it on social media. Don't keep score. Just do it because it feels right – and notice how your brain and heart respond.

Because sometimes, giving really is its own reward.

Go well!