

Survival of the friendliest: How to introduce a little more compassion into our lives

As a secret agent of compassion, the missions include doing random acts of kindness, caring for the environment/local neighbourhood, supporting charities and even just fully appreciating an everyday activity

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Why am I out on a gloomy Tuesday evening looking for a homeless person to give ten pounds to? It's a question I've asked myself a dozen times already as I stalk the half empty, neon-lit streets of my home town, Bournemouth.

It's not because I have A) gone mad, B) won the lottery, or C) committed some heinous sin that I need to atone for. The truth is weirder. As a 'secret agent of compassion' in the annual Compassion Games this is my clandestine mission for today – to perform a random act of kindness to a stranger.

This is my first mission and I'm kind of wondering what I've gotten myself into. It means I'm wandering the streets like some kind of Jack the Ripper of compassion seeking victims to do unspeakably kind things to when I could be at home watching the tele with a beer.

I'm about to give up when suddenly I spot a homeless man. I approach, whip my prepared tenner from my pocket and thrust it at him with a pseudo-nonchalant "there you go mate."

He is of course grateful but also pretty shocked. I'm not sure which he's more shocked about – the fact that a stranger is giving him ten pounds or that this stranger has such a candid look of relief on his face as he hands it over. We have a very brief, awkward chat. He doesn't seem as pleased as I thought he might. In fact he looks downright nervous. I say goodbye and disappear into the night like a crap Batman.

It's only a few minutes later that the half-paranoid, half-pragmatic thought strikes me that perhaps he thought I was trying to pick him up, that I was some kind of parsimonious pervert out bargain shopping for homeless people. Oh dear. I stop in my tracks thinking of turning back to explain myself but that way lies only disaster. Instead I walk home shaking my head and thinking "no, no, no," on repeat.

Mission one accomplished, kind of. Who'd have thought this compassion business would be so difficult?

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The Compassion Games is an annual international competition or 'coopetition' as they like to call it, which ran from 9-21 September where teams and individuals around the

world compete to be the most compassionate. It arose two years ago from the work of an American organisation, the Compassionate Action Network (CAN). In 2012 CAN gave its International Compassionate City Award to Louisville, Kentucky. The Mayor of Louisville responded with a challenge. "Louisville is the most compassionate city in the world," he said, "until proven otherwise." The idea of an international compassion 'cooperation' was born.

The games have grown to include teams of all kinds from all over the world including schools, families, community groups and even prisons (last year a prison in California entered and had its first ever 11-day period without a single act of violence). For individuals, like myself, there is the 'secret agent of compassion' option which is a series of 11 missions emailed to you daily over the course of the games.

The missions include doing random acts of kindness, caring for the environment or the local neighbourhood, supporting charitable organisations and even just fully appreciating an everyday activity like brushing your teeth. My own 11 days of compassion involved not just hunting down unsuspecting homeless people but also making a tangible act of appreciation for the environment (I planted some seeds in our communal garden) and engaging in an activity that made someone smile (I joined in with my girlfriend's fitness workout – boy did that one work!) Another mission involved listening to someone with your full undivided attention (I listened to my friend moan about work, at least I think it was that; I drifted off towards the end); another was to do something compassionate within your neighbourhood (I called an old lady on my road and offered to do her cleaning – this led to another awkward scenario but I'll spare you the discomfort).



The question is, I suppose, how did I get into all this in the first place? The culprit, as I suspect it is with many of these things, was a newsletter in my inbox.

I'd read a few books by Karen Armstrong, the former nun turned religious writer, and found her ideas on the place of religion, inter-faith dialogue and compassion in today's society thought-provoking. I looked into her a bit more and found that she had won the TED Prize for her work. Granted one wish by TED to change the world, she had chosen to set up a Charter for Compassion to implement the Golden Rule (that's the 'do unto others' one) across the globe. An ambitious cause to say the least in today's climate. I hit 'subscribe' to the newsletters and one day received an email about the Compassion Games. I realised I wasn't a very compassionate person and that this was a chance to force myself to become one.

So, given that it plunged me into several situations that were so neurotically awkward they could only have been devised by Woody Allen on a bad trip, was it all worth it? Do I feel like a better person?

Um... If I'm honest, no, not really. I feel like the same unkind, uncaring person, wrapped up in my own problems and wants as I ever did. But I guess that's not the point. The point, I guess, is not about what *I* feel but about what *others* feel. If for just 11 days of my life I thought a bit more about anyone other than myself for once, then I guess that's a start.