

# Many attendees of gatherings like Burning Man report 'transformative experiences'

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Throughout history, mass gatherings such as collective rituals, ceremonies, and pilgrimages have created intense social bonds and feelings of unity in human societies. But Yale psychologists wondered if modern day secular gatherings that emphasize creativity and community

serve an even broader purpose.

The research team studied people's subjective experiences and [social behavior](#) at secular [mass gatherings](#), such as the annual Burning Man festival in the Nevada desert. They found that people who reported transformative experiences at the gatherings felt more connected with all of humanity and were more willing to help distant strangers, the researchers report May 27 in the journal *Nature Communications*.

"We've long known that festivals, pilgrimages, and ceremonies make people feel more bonded with their own group," said Daniel Yudkin, a postdoctoral researcher and first author of the paper. "Here we show that experiences at secular mass gatherings also have the potential to expand the boundaries of moral concern beyond one's own group."

The research team, led by M.J. Crockett, an associate professor of psychology at Yale, conducted field studies of more than 1,200 people attending multi-day mass gatherings in the United States and United Kingdom: Burning Man, Burning Nest, Lightning in a Bottle, Dirty Bird, and Latitude, all events that feature art, music, and self-expression.

The researchers set up booths at the events inviting passersby to "Play Games for Science." Those who agreed to participate were asked about their experiences at the events along with their willingness to share resources with friends and strangers.

Overall, 63.2% of participants reported having transformative experiences so profound that they left the events feeling radically changed, including a substantial number of people who did not expect or desire to be transformed. (And yes, transformative experiences were more intense among the 28% of subjects who reported taking psychedelic substances.)

People who reported transformative experiences also reported feeling more socially connected with all human beings, and with every passing day they spent at these events, participants expanded their circle of generosity beyond family and friends towards including distant strangers. They recontacted some of the original attendees and also 2,000 people who had attended the event but were not originally interviewed. The researchers found that transformative experiences and their prosocial feelings persisted at least six months.

"The findings are an important reminder of what we've missed in years of pandemic isolation," Yudkin said. "Powerful social experiences, or what the sociologist Emile Durkheim called 'collective effervescence.'"

Crockett concluded that "transformative experiences help people transcend the borders of the self and connect with all of humanity—crucial qualities to cultivate as we work to end this pandemic and prevent future ones."

**More information:** Daniel A. Yudkin et al, Prosocial correlates of transformative experiences at secular multi-day mass gatherings, *Nature Communications* (2022). [DOI: 10.1038/s41467-022-29600-1](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-022-29600-1)

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