

Study examines what drives good deeds

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Every day, we face a series of opportunities to do the right thing. Sometimes we seize those moments; other times, we don't. So, why do we make these choices, and what drives some people to take the moral

high ground?

Jessie Sun, an assistant professor of psychological and brain sciences in Arts & Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis, explored the motivations for moral behavior in a study published in the *Journal of Personality*.

For the study, 952 people answered questionnaires about the changes they wished to make in their lives in order to become more morally good.

Here, Sun discusses her findings and the surprising reasons why some people make the effort to be good.

What does it mean to be moral?

Morality means different things to different people, but there are a few concepts that we can generally agree on. In our study, the most common moral goal was to be more compassionate. As one respondent put it, they would like to "practice more kindness toward others in daily life." Participants also valued the concepts of conscientiousness (including responsibility and self-control), honesty, open-mindedness, fairness and loyalty.

What motivates people to act morally?

When we think about [morality](#), we often think about making [personal sacrifices](#) for the greater good. But in this study, we found that nearly half of respondents said they were most motivated to become more moral for their own sake. Sixteen percent said that they were most motivated to become more moral for the sake of their immediate family, and fewer participants said that they most wanted to benefit friends,

acquaintances, and people in general.

Moreover, many people believe that acting more morally—for example, being more compassionate, more thoughtful, more open-minded—would increase their own well-being. The more they believed that their desired moral change would have positive consequences for themselves, the more they reported being motivated to make that change. In short, many people are motivated to become more moral for self-serving reasons. That was the most surprising finding in our study.

But people see some downsides to morality, too. Interestingly, respondents generally expected fewer benefits to themselves and others if they were honest. You can imagine that some people regularly tell white lies to save other people's [feelings](#), and they believed it would be hurtful if they were honest.

If morality is self-serving, why aren't more people making more moral choices?

If there's one thing we know from psychology, it's that change is difficult—even if we think it will be good for us in the long run. And even if it's beneficial to be more moral in an absolute sense, there might be relative tradeoffs when considering other changes you could make.

What are some common goals around morality?

Our study found that people are especially interested in improving positive traits. They see potential value in being fairer and more compassionate, for example. To a lesser extent, they are also willing to consider reducing their negative tendencies, such as not being so judgmental or argumentative.

Is morality really all that important to most people?

Most people believe they're basically good and decent, but they also tend to give themselves too much credit. In previous studies, my colleagues and I have asked people about the things they'd like to improve about themselves. People often say they'd like to be less anxious, more productive or more active, but they're less likely to say that they'd like to be more thoughtful, honest or compassionate.

Normally, if people know they have a problem with something, they want to fix it. If they're extremely introverted, they usually want to become more comfortable in social situations. But if someone says they aren't especially honest, humble or compassionate, they tend to not be especially compelled to improve those aspects of their lives. Morality just isn't a high priority for most people.

More information: Jessie Sun et al, How and why people want to be more moral, *Journal of Personality* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/jopy.12812](https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12812)

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