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Hello, Stranger

By Elizabeth W. Dunn and Michael Norton

If you've ever been on a subway or public bus, you know the rules. Don't make eye contact, stay as far away from other people as the space allows, and for the love of God, don't talk to anyone. But what if the rules are wrong?

The behavioral scientists Nicholas Epley and Juliana Schroeder approached commuters in a Chicago area train station and asked them to break the rules. In return for a \$5 Starbucks gift card, these commuters agreed to participate in a simple experiment during their train ride. One group was asked to talk to the stranger who sat down next to them on the train that morning. Other people were told to follow standard commuter norms, keeping to themselves. By the end of the train ride, commuters who talked to a stranger reported having a more positive experience than those who had sat in solitude.

If the idea of talking to a random seatmate fills you with dread, you're not alone. When Dr. Epley and Ms. Schroeder asked other people in the same train station to predict how they would feel after talking to a stranger, the commuters thought their ride would be more pleasant if they sat on their own.

Why are these commuters' predictions and their experiences so at odds? Most people imagined it would be difficult to start a conversation. They estimated that fewer than half of their fellow commuters would want to talk to them. But in fact, not a single person reported having been snubbed. And the conversations were consistently pleasant.

According to a 2004 study published in Science, commuting is associated with fewer positive emotions than any other common daily activity. By avoiding contact, we're all following a collective assumption that turns out to be false. When the middle-aged woman starts playing Candy Crush Saga after she sits down next to the hipster scrolling through his iTunes library, they both miss out on an opportunity for connection.

Individuals and governments pour money into making commutes slightly more bearable by investing in everything from noise-canceling headphones to more spacious seating. But what if the research showed that we would improve our commutes more by investing in social capital — interacting with the strangers sitting all around us?

The great thing about strangers is that we tend to put on our happy face when we meet them, reserving our crankier side for the people we know and love. When one of us, Liz, was in graduate school, she noticed that her boyfriend, Benjamin, felt free to act grumpy around her. But if he was forced to interact with a stranger or acquaintance, he would perk right up. Then his own pleasant behavior would often erase his bad mood.

Even fleeting glances can make a difference. Many of us have had the experience of what the Germans call “wie Luft behandeln” (“to be looked at as though air”). The social norm of avoiding eye contact seems harmless, but it might not be. In an experiment conducted at a large Midwestern university, a college-age woman walked by people on campus and either made eye contact, smiled at them while making eye contact, or directed her gaze “beyond the ear of the passer-by,” deliberately avoiding eye contact. She was trailed by another researcher, who surveyed people in her wake. Those who were looked at as though they weren’t there reported feeling more disconnected from others.

Simply acknowledging strangers on the street may alleviate their existential angst; and being acknowledged by others might do the same for us. (One caveat: Another set of studies has shown that people are motivated to flee from strangers who stare at them intently.)

The benefits of connecting with others also turn out to be contagious. Dr. Epley and Ms. Schroeder found that when one person took the initiative to speak to another in a waiting room, both people reported having a more positive experience. Far from annoying people by violating their personal bubbles, reaching out to strangers may improve their day, too.

Rather than fall back on our erroneous belief in the pleasures of solitude, we could reach out to other people. At least, when we walk down the street, we can refuse to accept a world where people look at one another as though through air. When we talk to strangers, we stand to gain much more than the “me time” we might lose.

Elizabeth W. Dunn, a professor at the University of British Columbia, and Michael Norton, a professor at Harvard Business School, are the authors of Happy Money: The Science of Smarter Spending.