

## What is Altruism?

French philosopher Auguste Comte coined the word *altruisme* with the meaning "self-sacrifice for the benefit of others" in 1851, and two years later it entered the English language as *altruism*.

Many considered his ethical system - in which the only moral acts were those intended to promote the happiness of others - rather extreme, so the meaning "loving others as oneself" evolved.

Now universal in evolutionary theory, the meaning "behaviour that promotes the survival chances of others at a cost to ones own" was coined by scientists exploring [how unselfish behaviour could have evolved](#). It is applied not only to people (psychological altruism), but also to animals and even plants.

Altruists choose to align their well-being with others - so they are happy when others thrive, sad when others are suffering. Essential in establishing strong [relationships](#), most societies acknowledge the importance of altruism within the family.

By motivating cooperation rather than conflict, it promotes harmony within communities of any size. Of course, peace within communities does not necessarily herald peace between communities, and the two may even be inversely related - witness for example, the way in which social strife tends to decrease within countries at war.

Altruists broaden their perspectives in an effort to overcome the artificial categories that break up the complex web of life. Altruism is the abdication of claims of power over others.

To state that "*None of us are worth more and none are worth less than anyone else*" is almost a truism, but modern [technology](#) has given a new urgency to all such appeals for altruism. Communications technology - and WWW in particular - is boosting altruism and establishing a [global consciousness](#). It is encouraging to see how easily individual acts of altruism can have a global impact (e.g. [Wikipedia](#), [free software](#), or [give away websites](#)).

Everything that makes it possible and enjoyable to live is a free gift. For almost all of history, humans never saw the need to buy and sell things, or even to barter. Altruism is its own reward. Positive [relationships](#) with others have always been a more natural basis for self-esteem than either material objects or illusions about [money](#) or power over others.

## Skills development exercises for further consideration

- What special gifts, talents, values, beliefs, intentions, passions and/or vision do you have, which if applied, could be an altruistic gift to others? It may be helpful to do some journal writing on this, brainstorming and/or dreaming of how you could help others on either a small one-on-one or a much bigger scale.
- In the above exercise, also consider what specific goals you could be setting with an altruistic intention. Write down the specific action plan.
- You may also wish to do an internet search on altruism, starting with the link listed in the acknowledgements section. In your research, you may find a wide range of opportunities for you to further explore your altruistic side.

## Acknowledgements

Most of the preceding material has been sourced from the following source:

- Altruists International – Helping Others  
[www.altruists.org/about/altruism](http://www.altruists.org/about/altruism)

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