

The Psychology of Compliments: A Nice Word Goes a Long Way

Imagine that you're sitting in a coffee shop enjoying your drink and reading the paper when someone taps you on the shoulder. "Your jacket is beautiful," the stranger says. "The color really complements your eyes."

You say thank you and return to reading. The whole exchange lasts less than 30 seconds, but it leaves you feeling uplifted.

A new field of research is delving into the positive effects of compliments and what motivates people to give them. Two researchers have investigated how individuals felt before and after giving or receiving compliments.

In one study, the researchers recruited people on a college campus to go to specified locations and give a compliment to the fourth person of the same gender they encountered. Before heading out, the participants answered some questions about how they felt about giving compliments. Once out on campus, they gave a brief compliment about the person's clothing, such as "I like your shirt." After giving the compliment, the participant handed the compliment-receiver a sealed envelope with a survey inside and waited for them to fill it out and reseal the envelope. The compliment receiver then returned to the lab with the survey.

The surveys showed that people who received the compliments felt happier, more pleased and flattered than the compliment-giver predicted. The researchers also found that compliment-givers were in a better mood after delivering a compliment

“Many of us have moments where we notice and appreciate something about another person—perhaps we like what they are wearing, or we were really impressed by their presentation—but we keep our appreciation to ourselves, rather than sharing it,” Bohn said. “This research offers an explanation for why: In the moment, we tend to forget how good a simple, even awkwardly delivered, compliment will make another person feel.”

The take-home message: Why not be generous in doling out compliments? Not only do compliments make the recipients feel good, but they will make you feel good as well!