You Matter Marathon: An Exploratory Study of Its Impact on Participants

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The You Matter Marathon (YMM) is a global initiative aimed at "creating and enriching positive connections between people and within communities" through affirming the significance and value of all (https://youmattermarathon.com/). It is perhaps no coincidence that this initiative corresponds with an increase in loneliness in many communities across the globe. For example, a recent Cigna poll found that nearly half of Americans report sometimes or always feeling alone (46%) or left out (47%) and only 53% of Americans report that they have meaningful in-person social interactions on a daily basis (https://www.multivu.com/players/English/8294451-cigna-us-loneliness-survey/). The brainchild of Cheryl Rice, the YMM is a simple, but potentially profound, idea. During the month of November, participants commit to hand out 30 cards with the simple statement "You Matter" to people within their community. According to the YMM website, one million You Matter (YM) cards have been shared by 100,000 participants since the movement's beginning in 2016. The You Matter Marathon has spread across 71 countries and all 50 US states and is impacting thousands of people worldwide.

Testimonials on the website illustrate the profound impact participation in the Marathon has had on past participants. For example, participants report increased feelings of happiness, compassion, gratitude, and an enhanced connection with others. Numerous participants have shared their experiences and how the YMM helped them through their own hardships, such as battles with addiction, sickness, and death, as well as how they have used to it help others. The purpose of this study is to provide a more rigorous test of the impact of giving YM cards by using reliable and valid psychological scales of the constructs of interest and comparing YMM participants to a control group.

Psychologists define happiness as frequent positive affect, high life satisfaction, and infrequent negative affect (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). A plethora of research demonstrates that happier people experience better mental and physical health; are more cooperative, prosocial, and charitable; and experience more "other-centered" emotions (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). Although research suggests that as much as 50% of a person's general happiness level is genetically determined, intentional activities such as expressing kindness and experiencing gratitude have been shown to increase happiness (Lyubomirsky, et al., 2005). Fundamentally, giving someone a You Matter card is an act of kindness and, depending on the circumstances, may also be an expression of gratitude. We therefore predict that distributing You Matter cards will increase participants' subjective happiness.

Just as there are more and less happy people, there are more and less grateful people. At the dispositional level, gratitude is part of a wider life orientation toward the positive. Grateful people notice what is positive in the present moment, count their blessings, and appreciate others (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). Grateful people, like happy people, enjoy many benefits. For example, they are at lower risk for depression and anxiety, experience more positive affect, and report greater levels of satisfaction with their lives (Wood et al., 2010). Although having a grateful orientation toward life is relatively stable over time, several intentional activities, including keeping gratitude lists and writing gratitude letters, have shown to increase gratitude and hence psychological well-being (Wood et al., 2010). Engaging in the YMM is a potentially powerful way to increase feelings of gratitude in that it may serve to focus participants' attention to what is positive in the moment and toward greater appreciation of others. We therefore predict that distributing You Matter cards will increase participants' feelings of gratitude.

People also vary in their habitual levels of compassion. Compassion encompasses "feelings, cognitions, and behaviors that are focused on caring, concern, tenderness, and an orientation toward supporting, helping, and understanding others" (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005, p. 630). Research suggests that developing greater feelings of compassion leads to greater pro-social behavior (Hwang, Plante & Lackey, 2010), which can put in motion a series of events leading to greater psychological well-being. The widely-supported self-perception theory (Bem, 1972) predicts that if people behave in a compassionate way, their feelings and cognitions are likely to follow. Giving people You Matter cards, perhaps especially to those who are troubled or suffering, is an act of compassion. We predict therefore that distributing You Matter cards will increase participants' sense of compassion for others.

Social connectedness is another important individual difference variable that may be enhanced through participation in the YMM. Social connectedness is defined as "the subjective awareness of being in close relationship with the social world in toto" (Lee & Robbins, 1998, p. 338). Those with high levels of social connectedness feel close to others, perceive people as friendly, and are motivated to engage actively in their communities (Liao & Weng, 2018). Research shows that people who feel more socially connected have less anxiety (Mccoy, 1999) and therefore greater psychological well-being. Giving someone a You Matter card, perhaps especially in person, is an act of social connection, which over time may increase a more global sense of social connectedness. We predict therefore that distributing You Matter cards will increase participants' sense of social connectedness.

Methods

Participants

All participants in the 2018 You Matter Marathon were invited to participate. Those who accepted our invitation ranged in age from 18 to 55 and older and included men (n=31), women (n=322) and one person selecting "other gender." All faculty and a random sample of 1000 students at a small university in the mid-Atlantic United States were invited to participate in the control group. Those who accepted our invitation ranged in age from 18 to 55 and older and included both men (n=93) and women (n=223).

Procedures

In late October, both YMM and control participants received an email with a link to an online survey created in Qualtrics. The survey included demographic questions, the Subjective Happiness Scale, Social Connectedness Scale, Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale, and the Gratitude Scale. YMM participants were also asked about their motivation for participating in the Marathon. YMM participants were instructed to give someone a You Matter card each day during the month of November. Post-tests were distributed in early December. Both YMM and control participants once again completed the Subjective Happiness Scale, Social Connectedness Scale, Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale, and the Gratitude Scale. YMM participants were also asked to answer additional questions regarding the number of cards they distributed and open-ended questions about their participation. The full survey can be found in the Appendix.

Materials

Subjective Happiness Scale. The 4-item Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) asks participants to rate their level of happiness on 7-point scales. One of the items reads: "Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going

on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you?"

Scores range from one to seven, with higher scores representing greater happiness.

Social Connectedness Scale. The Social Connectedness Scale (Lee, Draper, & Lee, 2001) asks participants to rate their level of agreement with 20 items on 6-point scales. Items include "I feel distant from most people" (reverse scored) and "I am able to connect with other people." Scores range from one to six, with higher scores representing greater social connectedness.

Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale. The third scale participants completed was the 5-item Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale (Hwang, Plante, & Lackey, 2008). On 6-point scales, participants rated their level of agreement to statements such as: "When I hear about someone (a stranger) going through a difficult time, I feel a great deal of compassion for him or her." Scores range from one to six, with higher scores representing greater compassion.

The Gratitude Questionnaire. The last survey participants completed was the 5-item Gratitude Questionnaire (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). On 7-point scales, participants indicated how strongly they agreed with statements such as: "When I look at the world, I don't see much to be grateful for" (reverse scored) and "I am grateful to a wide variety of people." Scores range from one to seven, with higher scores representing greater gratitude.

Results

There were 269 participants who took both the pretest and posttest. However, there were only 257 participants who completed all of the measures on both tests, including 148 control participants and 109 YMM participants. Control participants included both men (n=34) and women (n=114), and all age groups, with a plurality in the youngest age category: 18-25 (n=55), 26-35 (n=23), 36-45 (n=23), 46-55 (n=29), and 55 and older (n=18). YMM participants also

included men (n=5) and women (n=103) as well as one person selecting "other gender." YMM participants spanned all age groups although over half fell in the 55 and older category: 18-25 (n=5), 26-35 (n=3), 36-45 (n=19), 46-55 (n=23), and 55 and older (n=59).

Means, ranges and standard deviations for the pretest and posttest measures can be found in Table 1. Correlations among the measures can be found in Tables 2 & 3.

All four measures used to test the effects of distributing the You Matter cards showed good internal reliability: Subjective Happiness Scale (Chronbach's α=0.90), Social Connectedness Scale (Chronbach's α=0.95), Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale (Cronbach's α=0.90), and Gratitude Questionnaire (Cronbach's α= 0.85).

Four repeated measures ANOVAs were performed to test whether participants in the YMM showed greater increases in happiness, social connectedness, compassion, and gratitude compared to those in the control group. Means can be found in Table 4.

Subjective Happiness. There was a significant main effect for time on happiness, $F(1,260)=5.72$, $p=.02$, revealing that participants in general reported greater happiness at posttest than at pretest. There was also a significant main effect for condition, $F(1,260)=12.72$, $p<0.001$, revealing that YMM participants reported greater happiness than control participants. The predicted interaction, however, was not significant, $F(1,260)=0.00$, $p=.98$. In other words, happiness increased from pretest to posttest equally for both YMM and control participants.

Social Connectedness. There was a significant main effect for time on social connectedness, $F(1,260)=9.65$, $p=.002$, revealing that participants in general reported greater social connectedness at posttest than pretest. There was also a significant main effect for condition on social connectedness, $F(1,260)=9.33$, $p=.002$, revealing that YMM participants reported greater social connectedness than control participants. The predicted interaction,

however, was not significant, F(1,260)=0.21, p=.65. In other words, social connectedness increased from pretest to posttest equally for both YMM and control participants.

Compassion. The main effect for time on compassion was not significant, F(1,260)=0.09, p=.76. However, there was a significant main effect for condition on compassion, F(1,260)= 26.48, p<.001, revealing that YMM participants scored higher on compassion than did control participants. As predicted, there was also a significant interaction, F(1,260)=5.12, p=.02, showing that YMM participants, but not control participants, reported higher compassion at posttest than at pretest.

Gratitude. There was a significant main effect for time on gratitude, F(1,260)=11.18, p<.001, revealing that participants in general reported more gratitude at posttest than at pretest. There was also a significant main effect for condition on gratitude, F(1,260)=5.00, p=.03, with YMM participants scoring higher than control participants. The interaction on gratitude was not significant, F(1,260)=1.42, p=.24. In other words, both YMM and control participants reported more gratitude at posttest than at pretest.

Additional Tests. Among YMM participants, the number of cards shared ranged from zero (n=1) to 1000 (n=1), with more sharing 30 or more (n=56) than sharing less than 30 (n=51). We reasoned that YMM participants who shared fewer cards may have been less affected by their participation than those who shared more cards. We tested for this idea in two ways. First, we ran the same ANOVAs as above after deleting participants who shared fewer than 10 cards, and ran the ANOVAs yet again after deleting participants who shared fewer than 30 cards. These ANOVAs revealed effects that are consistent with the ANOVAs conducted with all participants. In other words, the predicted interaction occurred only on the compassion variable, with YMM

participants, but not control participants, showing an increase in compassion from pretest to posttest.

Next, we dichotomized participants into those who shared less than 30 cards (n=51) and those who shared 30 or more cards (n=56). Two-way ANOVAs revealed that those who shared more cards did not show a significantly bigger increase on any of the measures than did those who shared fewer cards. However, the means show the expected pattern on both the compassion and gratitude measures. We therefore followed up with paired-sample t-tests. As expected, those who distributed 30 or more cards showed an increase in compassion from pretest to posttest, t(55)=2.29, p=03, whereas the pretest and posttest mean compassion scores for those who distributed fewer than 30 cards is nearly identical. Similarly, those who distributed 30 or more cards showed a significant increase in gratitude from pretest to posttest, t(55)=2.51, p=.02, whereas the pretest and posttest mean gratitude scores for those who distributed fewer than 30 cards is nearly identical. (See Table 5 for means.)

We also tested to see if participants who reported they signed up for the YMM "to connect with others" or "to express gratitude in a new way" had increased feelings of happiness, social connectedness, compassion, or gratitude after distributing You Matter cards compared to participants who did not sign up for these reasons. There were no significant effects of motivation on any of the measures.

We also examined whether people of different ages or genders were differentially affected by distributing You Matter cards, and found no evidence for this.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre Happiness	262	2.00	7.00	5.3	1.21
Pre Social Connectedness	262	1.70	6.00	4.6	0.92
Pre Compassion	262	1.40	7.00	4.9	0.91
Pre Gratitude	262	1.80	7.00	6.2	0.94
Post Happiness	263	1.50	7.00	5.4	1.14
Post Social Connectedness	263	2.10	6.00	4.7	0.86
Post Compassion	258	1.80	7.00	4.9	0.90
Post Gratitude	285	2.60	6.00	6.3	0.85

Table 2. Pretest Correlations

Variable	Pre-Happiness	Pre-Social Connectedness	Pre-Compassion	Pre-Gratitude
Pre-Happiness	_			
Pre-Social Connectedness	0.68**	_		
Pre-Compassion	0.32**	0.33**	_	
Pre-Gratitude	0.63**	0.63**	0.33**	_

Table 3. Posttest Correlations

Variable	Post-Happiness	Post-Social Connectedness	Post-Compassion	Post-Gratitude
Post-Happiness	_			
Post-Social Connectedness	0.66**	_		
Post-Compassion	0.34**	0.38**	_	
Post- Gratitude	0.50**	0.53**	0.30**	_

Table 4. Control and You Matter Marathon participants means on the pretest and posttest for each dependent measure

		Control		YMM	
		Means	**SD**	**Means**	**SD**
Happiness	Pre Test	5.08	1.22	5.57	1.10
	Post Test	5.19	1.17	5.67	1.04
Social Connectedness	Pre Test	4.45	0.92	4.75	0.89
	Post Test	4.54	0.88	4.87	0.78
Compassion	Pre Test	4.73	1.02	5.18	0.67
	Post Test	4.66	0.98	5.27	0.63
Gratitude	Pre Test	6.08	1.01	6.36	0.78
	Post Test	6.27	0.88	6.45	0.81

Table 5. The means of YMM participants who distributed less than 30 cards and YMM participants who distributed 30 or more cards for each dependent measure on the pretest and posttest

		Below 30		30+	
		Mean	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**
Happiness	Pre Test	5.47	1.18	5.60	1.03
	Post Test	5.62	1.14	5.67	0.93
Social Connectedness	Pre Test	4.73	1.00	4.77	0.80
	Post Test	4.83	0.85	4.89	0.73
Compassion	Pre Test	5.11	0.69	5.24	0.65
	Post Test	5.13	0.70	5.40	0.54
Gratitude	Pre Test	6.30	0.90	6.39	0.66
	Post Test	6.32	1.00	6.57	0.59

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if participating in the You Matter Marathon affected happiness, social connectedness, compassion, and gratitude. We assessed this by performing repeated measure ANOVAs and paired samples t-tests. As predicted, we found that YMM participants showed a significant increase in compassion from pretest to posttest that was not shared by the control group. Furthermore, we found that those who distributed 30 cards or more showed an increase in compassion whereas those who distributed fewer cards did not.

Unexpectedly, we found that both YMM and control participants showed an increase in happiness, social connectedness, and gratitude from pretest to posttest, suggesting that distributing cards did not cause the increase. We did find some evidence however that distributing YMM cards increases gratitude in that participants who distributed 30 cards or more showed a significant increase in gratitude, whereas those who distributed fewer cards did not. These results may suggest that distributing You Matter cards has a significant impact on compassion and perhaps gratitude, but not subjective happiness or social connectedness.

It is interesting that both YMM and control participants showed an increase in happiness, social connectedness, and gratitude over time (from late October to late November). It is plausible that the celebration of Thanksgiving at the end of November, which traditionally brings family and friends together to give thanks, contributed to enhanced happiness, social connectedness, and gratitude for all participants. If the YMM occurred at another time of year that is not so focused on family, friends, and giving thanks, we may have observed a significantly larger increase in these feelings for YMM participants than for a control group. Furthermore, we also should consider the effectiveness of our measures. Even though they are

reliable and valid measures, they may not capture well the subjective experience of YMM participants. Narrative self-reports are another form of valid information that may convey individual subjective experiences more effectively than Likert scales. Below are some anecdotes from YMM participant at posttest:

"I was amazed at how much those 2 words could make a difference in someone's day. There is a terrible disconnect in today's society. I met so many people that I didn't know and had great conversations about how we need to connect more and be kind to one another. Sometimes it's the smallest acts that crate the biggest impact on someone else's life."

"One woman who I only know as someone who volunteers at our public library was so taken by the card she stood and talked with me for many minutes. Since then we always speak."

"There was a kid working the check out at the grocery store before Thanksgiving, and he seemed SO stressed. Yet, he was managing to keep a smile and be nice – even with a woman ahead of me who was pretty snippy to him. As I waited in line, I pulled out a card, and jotted a note on the back "Your attitude makes a difference. Thank you so much!" After I checked out and paid, I was started to head out, and I said, Oh, wait, I forgot something, and handed over the card. He looked at me a little strangely at first, but then broke out into a grin. "That is SO COOL!" he said. It seemed to lighten his day, and it surely lightened mine."

These anecdotes illustrate a subjective experience of social connectedness and gratitude that perhaps cannot be captured by our survey.

Appendix

Subjective Happiness Scale

For each of the following statements and/or questions, participants circled a number from 1 to 7

that was most appropriate in describing them.

1. In general I consider myself:

    Not a very happy person (1) → a very happy person (7)

2. Compared with most of my peers, I consider myself:

    Less happy (1) → more happy (7)

3. Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on,

    getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you?

    Not at all (1) → a great deal (7)

4. Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem

    as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you? (reverse

    scored)

    Not at all (1) → a great deal (2)

Social Connectedness Scale

Participants rated the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement from 1

(Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree).

1. I feel distant from people. (Reverse Scored)

2. I don't feel like I can relate to most people. (Reverse Scored)

3. I feel like an outsider. (Reverse Scored)

4. I see myself as a loner. (Reverse Scored)

5. I feel disconnected from the world around me. (Reverse Scored)

6. I don't feel I participate with anyone or any group. (Reverse Scored)

7. I feel close to people.

8. Even around people I know, I don't feel that I really belong. (Reverse Scored)

9. I am able to relate to my peers.

10. I catch myself losing a sense of connectedness with society. (Reverse Scored)

11. I am able to connect with other people.

12. I feel understood by the people I know.

13. I see people as friendly and approachable.

14. I fit in well in new situation.

15. I have little sense of togetherness with my peers. (Reverse Scored)

16. My friends feel like family.

17. I find myself actively involved in people's lives.

18. Even among my friends, there is no sense of brotherhood/sisterhood. (Reverse Scored)

19. I am in tune with the world.

20. I feel comfortable in the presence of strangers.

Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale

Participants indicated how true each statements was of them from 1 (not at all) to 6 (very)

1. When I hear about someone (a stranger) going through a difficult time, I feel a great deal of compassion for him or her.

2. I tend to feel compassion for people, even though I do not know them.

3. One of the activities that provides me with the most meaning to my life is helping others in the world when they need help.

4. I would rather engage in actions that help others, even though they are strangers, than engage in actions that would help me.

5. I often have tender feelings toward people (strangers) when they seem to be in need.

The Gratitude Questionnaire – Six Item Form (GQ-6)

Participans indicated how much they agreed with each statement from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

1. I have so much in life to be thankful for.

2. If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list.

3. When I look at the world, I don't see much to be grateful for. (Reverse Scored)

4. I am grateful to a wide variety of people.

5. As I get older, I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events, and situations that have been part of my life history.

Additional questions on the survey:

Demographics:

1. What is your gender?

2. What is your race?

3. What is your age?

4. What is your level of education?

To YMM participants (pre-test):

1. Have you participated in the You Matter Marathon in previous years?

    a. No

    b. Yes, in 2016

    c. Yes, in 2017

      d. Yes, in both 2016 and 2017

2. Do you have a practice of handing out You Matter cards throughout the year?

      a. Yes, if Yes, approximately how many have you handed out since January 1?

      b. No

Why did you Sign up for the You Matter Marathon (check all that apply)?

- To have fun

- To connect with others

- To express gratitude in a new way

- To be part of a community of like-minded people

- To challenge myself

- I was encouraged to sign up by a family member/friend/colleague

- Other: Please list

How did you Learn about the You Matter Marathon (check all that apply)?

- Social media (Facebook/Twitter/Instagram/LinkedIn

- TV: Please list

- Radio/podcast: Please list

- Blog post:

- Other: Please list

To YMM participants (post-test):

1. How many You Matter cards did you distribute during the month of November?

2. Of all the cards you distributed, approximately how many did you distribute in person?

3. Of all the cards you distributed, approximately how many did you give out to people you already have a connection with?

4. Will you continue sharing You Matter cards on your own?

   a. Yes

   b. No

   c. Maybe

5. What did you gain from participating in the You Matter Marathon?

6. Can you share a few anecdotes about your experience participating in the You Matter Marathon?

7. Do you have any additional feedback about the You Matter Marathon?

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