

OPINION SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

I've started giving compliments to strangers. And you should too

By Cameron Bayley
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I was absent-mindedly making my way up the escalator from a grocery store in Manhattan when a woman behind me tapped me on the shoulder. “I love your shoelaces!” she exclaimed, pointing at the neon cords securing my trainers. “I noticed them in the store and just had to tell you!”

I was a little taken aback. Who comments on someone’s laces? Americans, that’s who.



Giving a compliment can feel just as good as receiving one, according to experts. CREDIT: ISTOCK

Currently living in New York City, one thing has become quite apparent to me: locals aren’t reticent to let you know if they appreciate what you’re wearing – something Australians aren’t necessarily used to.

“We’re very risk-averse and cautious about interacting with people often,” explains etiquette expert Julie Lamberg-Burnet, founder of the Sydney

School of Protocol. “[Whereas] it’s part of the American DNA. They are very effusive in terms of their praise, so it goes with the territory.”

Having spent the last few months in the Big Apple, I’ll admit this behaviour is infectious. I’m already beginning to give kudos to those I run into at a café or bar, or in the queue to see *Titanique* (when one woman’s pink opera coat demanded acknowledgement).

It makes sense. Who doesn’t like a bit of recognition? After encountering my shoelace fan, I walked home with a spring in my newly praised step. “You can really make someone feel special on a day when you just connect with them,” explains Lamberg-Burnet. “You can see their face light up.”

It’s no great surprise to find out that research shows random acts of flattery do make people happy on the most part. However, according to associate professor Lisa Williams, a social psychologist at UNSW, it’s been proven that the person doing the flattering also gets a rush.

“We benefit as the complimenter,” says Williams. “It gives us a sense of positivity and pleasure.” And she’s not wrong: raving to my pink-jacketed friend did make me smile.

Williams explains there’s been some investigation in the social psychology field into the very real benefits of having small moments with strangers. Put simply: that quick chat with your local barista may be doing more for you than you think. “Recent work has highlighted the value of these types of minimal social interactions,” she says. “And how they build up a net of social connections that are important.”

It’s common, however, to have a bit of fear about giving words of praise. “People think, ‘Oh my goodness, it may not land well’ so they just avoid it,” says Lamberg-Burnet.

Talking Honey’s Shelly Horton, John Aiken, Jane de Graaff and Jo Abi discuss the issue of men complimenting women and the rules that should be followed.

This is something Williams agrees with. “They tend not to have conversations with strangers because they underestimate how good it will make them feel and they also overestimate how awkward it might be,” she says. “[But] if we see an opportunity to compliment someone, within the realm of polite social norms, then we probably should give ourselves a bit more of a green light to do that.”

Of course, this is not to say you should step outside and immediately compliment every person that crosses your path. There are plenty of circumstances where a compliment may not be welcome, or be inappropriate, and giving compliments should never come at the cost of someone feeling violated or objectified.

In other words, read the room. “You do need to be really mindful,” warms Lamberg-Burnet, who recommends taking a beat and giving yourself a sense-check before blurting something out. “I always say, ‘breathe through your nose before you speak’. It’s a good policy.”

Can you learn how to make conversation? Here are some tips When dishing out compliments, remarking on something physical like someone’s weight or body, or age is very likely going to get a harsh glare – or worse. It’s better to look at specific details, whether it’s something particular they’re wearing (hello, shoelaces) or something they’ve done that you admire.

And, yes, occasionally a nice word may not land. “But that doesn’t mean you should never try again,” Williams advises. “We could be countering a lot of our loneliness by doing a bit more of this type of social connection.”

Making small talk is also a way to break out of our mobile-phone bubble, says Lamberg-Burnet. “We’ve forgotten about how to have that interaction with other people and start engaging with people.”

Extending some kudos to those within your circle is just as important, from work colleagues to friends, partners and family. Williams says that research shows that partners who feel gratitude towards each other can feel happier. “I think compliments would be right along those lines. The more we can intentionally contribute to the positivity of a relationship, the more we’re going to get out of it.”

But it can be a bit of a mindset readjustment. Moving into your day being open to note the more positive aspects in the world around you, can really change your outlook. “[It can help] get out of some of the cynicism that many of us get trapped into,” says Williams.

So challenge yourself to look up from your phone and see what makes you smile about someone near you. Start with the shoe.