

# THE OPRAH MAGAZINE

## How to Trust People—Even When You Expect the Worst

*One writer learns that surprisingly sweet things can happen when you get past cynicism and let yourself see the best in people.*

By Alina Tugend



Photo: Mauricio Alejo

**A** friend and I were walking around Los Angeles when a skinny teenager came up and asked for money to buy milk. My friend handed him \$20. I thought she was a fool.

A few days later, when we were in the same

area, the teen approached us again. Yup, I thought, he knows an easy mark. But instead of asking for more money, he thanked my friend for what she'd already given him and told her how he'd managed to get some food and was now feeling much more positive

about life. Then he walked on.

I thought my friend was far too gullible, but some would say I was too skeptical. Nobody wants to be a sucker, but is that reason enough to be a hard-boiled cynic?

“We think of people who are very trusting as being naive,” says Nancy Carter, PhD, a director at the Nova Scotia Health Research Foundation. “But that’s not always the case—being more trusting may make us better at knowing when we’re being played.” Carter points to a study she did at the University of Toronto in which participants were asked to pick which job applicants had been dishonest after watching videos of interviews in which half the candidates told three lies. It turned out that the people who ranked as “high trusters” were more likely to detect the frauds, in part by picking up on subtle cues (some studies have shown that liars tend to fidget more and speak in higher-pitched voices).

When I heard about Carter’s study, I actually felt a twinge of envy. These high trusters could rely on their instincts to accurately size someone up, while my reflex was to be wary of just about everyone. Recently, after I’d left my car at the auto shop for repairs, I spent hours fretting that the mechanic was going to do a lousy job. Finally, my exasperated husband said, “What if he’s actually good? Why can’t you look at it that way?” He was right—too often my default mode was to assume that people were out to rip me off, do me wrong, and generally act selfishly. By constantly fearing that I was going to be taken, I was piling needless anxiety on myself and driving my family crazy. Could making the effort to see the best in others—even for just one weekend—help me rein in my cynicism enough to stop mistrusting the world?

I began my experiment when I ran into a neighbor at a cocktail party. In the past, I’d avoided her because she seemed judgmental; this time I struck up a conversation. After learning that our children were entering high school together, I decided to trust her with a private fear and

shared my anxieties over how my son was adapting to the new environment. To my surprise, she was worrying about the same thing with her own child. Far from trampling on my emotions in a vulnerable moment, she was actually sympathizing with me. As I left the party, I told her I’d love to stay in touch. We weren’t new best friends, of course, but I couldn’t help wondering how many other relationships I had shortchanged by being so quick to write people off. After all, it’s rare that I find myself in a position to realize when I’ve misread people—and even rarer to have the opportunity to give them a second chance.

The next day, when a woman I volunteer with complimented me on a newspaper article I’d written, my gut reaction was to deflect the praise. I assumed she was buttering me up to ask for help with some writing task, as she had done in the past. But then I recalled something David Dunning, PhD, professor of psychology at Cornell University, told me before I embarked on this mission: Since we’re more likely to remember betrayals than positive interactions, we underestimate people’s sincerity and generosity and overestimate their selfishness.

In one study Dunning led, he asked participants what they thought would happen if they gave money to strangers who had the option to split the cash with them or keep it all. The givers guessed the receivers would share the money about 45 percent of the time. In fact, the receivers said they would hand back half the cash in nearly 80 percent of the transactions, proving Dunning’s point that we’re often unfairly cynical about others.

Now, in the face of the woman’s kind words, I could see that our past interaction had triggered my negative response. It was up to me to reset my perspective, so I forced myself to trust that she was being sincere and thanked her. When she didn’t follow up with a request for help, I moved on, proud that I had done the right thing. I hadn’t predicted that by trying to see the good in others, I’d wind up feeling better about myself.

I realized then that this experiment was about more than just learning to trust people—I was letting go of some of the pessimism I'd allowed to build up in my life. Freeing myself of my "everyone's a jerk" mentality was indeed feeling like a far less taxing way to live, and as the day went on, I noticed that I wasn't getting as heated over little perceived injustices. In fact, later that afternoon, when another driver pulled into a parking space I was about to take, I didn't immediately assume he intentionally stole it from me. Instead, I took a moment to see it from his view—maybe he thought I was just idling on the street or that I'd stopped to make a phone call—and it actually seemed

like an honest mistake. By the time I found a new parking spot, I was over it. The draining, time-consuming anger I would normally have felt in this situation had vanished.

It's inevitable that I'll get duped again, but that's the price of trust. "One person's bad behavior isn't a reflection of humankind," Dunning says. "Rather than living your life on high alert, you have to be willing to be vulnerable." And as I have learned, the payoff of having a little faith—that someone in need could truly use your help; that a person you used to keep at arm's length could become a friend—far outweighs the fear of feeling like a fool.

Alina Tugend is a *New York Times* columnist and the author of *Better by Mistake* (Riverhead).