



The Positive Psychology of Zombies


A Review of

Train to Busan (2016)

by Sang-yo Heon (Director)

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Reviewed by

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"I don't like zombie films. I can't stand to watch horror films. I want nothing to do with the topic of zombies."

These are common sentiments expressed by me and a wide range of people I've spoken with . . . and then came *The Walking Dead*, the most popular TV series on cable. Now in its seventh season, this series features its antiheroes in a postapocalyptic nightmare in which other survivors and the sects they've created are more dangerous than the slow-moving but ferocious zombies. *The Walking Dead* offers a profound commentary on the topics of death, dying, meaning, existence, resilience, teamwork, and leadership. It offers substance, artistry, and complex characters, along with gore and suspense. Viewers can use a positive psychology lens and learn from the characters what bad and good leadership look like, how to collaborate or sabotage a team, how to be virtuous and strength based, and how to be resilient when there is absolutely no other choice.

Mindlessness and Mindfulness

Consistent with Priester (2005), who observed there is great value in adopting a metaphorical lens when viewing zombie productions, viewers can understand that a deeper examination of these productions almost always contains a commentary on mindfulness and mindlessness. The one-dimensional behavior of zombies is a prototype of what social psychologist/philosopher Erich Fromm (1955) called the automaton, a condition in which human beings are trapped in automatic routine. Modern mindfulness researchers and practitioners refer to this as operating on autopilot, giving little or no attention to one's driving, eating, listening, working, or breathing (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Niemiec, 2014; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2013). Mindful attention is purposeful and involved; scientifically speaking, it refers to self-control of our attention and an attitude of curiosity, openness, and acceptance (Bishop et al., 2004). Humans experience a pervasive vulnerability to returning to a zombie-like mode, often unaware they are in that mode, wandering and meandering aimlessly, not unlike zombies on the big screen.

Characters in movies and television shows about zombies must maintain vigilant attention to their environment or they will perish. This lines up with the negative effects of mindlessness, such as research documenting that a wandering mind is an unhappy mind (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). When this vigilance becomes a balanced, mindful awareness that is not hyperfocused but still attentive to one's thoughts, feelings, and desires, as well as the emotions, nonverbal body language, and the behavior of others, mindfulness becomes more meaningful and supports the development of meaningful relationships between characters. Such themes are visible in any substantive zombie film.

The Walking Dead serves as a "gateway" for many people to explore other zombie features. One of the most recent examples is a South Korean film entitled *Train to Busan*. This film centers on a workaholic, white-collar father, Seok Woo, and his young daughter, Soo-an. For her birthday, Soo-an has repeatedly asked to see her out-of-town mother; she has a much closer relationship to her mother than she has with her father. Following some resistance due to his work demands, Seok Woo eventually gives in and decides to accompany Soo-an by train from Seoul to Busan to get her to her mother. As they settle in for the train ride, Seok Woo disregards his daughter, oblivious to her recent struggles, ignoring anything she might be thinking and feeling. Instead, he focuses mindlessly on work, occasionally sleeping due to exhaustion from working too much. Unbeknownst to them, a zombie apocalypse has started, and a rogue victim infected by the virus has boarded the train. The virus spreads from one person to another, and chaos unfolds, leading passengers to panic as they desperately flee from the emerging (and fast-moving) zombies to other train cars for temporary refuge.

A Journey Toward Kindness

In the early 2000s, social scientists developed a common language for describing what is best in human beings, specifically 24 strengths of character found across cultures, nations, and belief systems (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Research is now revealing a plethora of positive outcomes associated with these strengths and numerous psychological interventions to build them up (Niemiec, 2017). A handful of these character strengths will be discussed in this review, with particular attention to the strength of kindness, which has dimensional features that include compassion, altruism, care, niceness, and generosity.

One way to understand *Train to Busan* is to view the film as an allegory—one man's journey from selfishness to kindness, from self-absorption to interpersonal connection. The "container" of the train—the setting for the majority of the film—represents the mind and the zombies represent distractions or "mental events." In Buddhist terminology, these are the mental formations that pull people out of the present moment—they are the challenges with which a mindful individual must grapple. The zombies are obstacles on Seok Woo's journey toward kindness. The zombies are the relentless, pervasive, inescapable intrusions of addiction (thoughts, urges, and desires), in this case manifestations of Seok Woo's "work addiction."

Stay with this metaphor: The people on the train are the opportunities—the potentialities for connection, for "sobriety" and healing, for virtuous expression, and the means by which mindfulness and character strengths expression can flourish. Indeed, many of the train's passengers use their strengths to help one another by "rising to the occasion." Strengths that are used in this way are referred to as *phasic strengths* because individuals bring the

strength forth very strongly when a given situation calls for it (Niemiec, 2017; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Some passengers use their strength of bravery to sacrifice themselves, others use their strengths of perseverance and zest to deal with their desperate situation, and others deploy their strengths of love, fairness, social intelligence, and kindness to help or support others. Other passengers fail to use character strengths and refuse to help others or, worse, directly place vulnerable passengers in harm's way. This theme of connecting in relationships is one of the central tenets of zombie films, as noted by Priester's (2005) interpretation of *28 Days Later* (2002) and classics by George Romero, such as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), and *Day of the Dead* (1985).

At first, Seok Woo spends most of his time on his phone working, ignoring his daughter. His selfishness is called out directly by another passenger when he doesn't take a small risk to help a desperate passenger and his pregnant wife. Soo-an, in direct contrast, practices kindness by offering her seat to an elderly woman. After this incident, Seok Woo chastises his daughter, instructing her that a zombie apocalypse is a time for selfishness, not kindness. Soo-an refuses to compromise her character strengths. She teaches her father about kindness, and she takes advantage of this opportunity for mindfulness. In this scene, she adds, "Dad, you only care about yourself. That's why mommy left." It takes several of these critical moments, alongside other wake-up calls (which come in the form of zombie attacks), before Seok Woo realizes how disconnected he is from his daughter. Finally noticing her distress, he reaches out and touches her with one finger. This single moment represents a profound shift toward kindness and love.

Seok Woo's development of kindness as well as the positive contagion between the daughter and her father are consistent with research on kindness. Researchers have documented support for not only the contagion of kindness, such as the pay-it-forward effect, but also for specific kindness interventions. For example, a study of children aged 9–11 years who performed three acts of kindness per week for 4 weeks showed improved well-being and significant increases in popularity (Layous, Nelson, Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Lyubomirsky, 2012); another study found that students who offered random kind acts for 1.5 hr experienced many benefits, including enhanced positive emotions and fewer negative emotions (Pressman, Kraft, & Cross, 2015). A third study examined the character strength of kindness and the Big 5 personality trait of agreeableness in the context of a "helping" situation and found that only kindness predicted helping behavior (Lefevor & Fowers, 2016). Researchers have also found that the practice of mindfully counting one's acts of kindness is an effective intervention for boosting happiness (Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui, & Fredrickson, 2006) and decreasing depression (Gander, Proyer, Ruch, & Wyss, 2013).

Redemption: The Final Phase of the Journey

While a zombie apocalypse is an unfolding of a foreboding and disastrous process that is ugly and scary, *Train to Busan* simultaneously illustrates the unfolding of the opposite—a positive and loving relationship and the emergence of the strength of kindness. Beauty, optimism, and inspiration are clear in the film.

Seok Woo becomes more mindful and caring as he moves toward a more protective, self-sacrificing fatherly love. This culminates in his ultimate sacrifice. He is bitten and knows the virus will soon take effect. He offers wisdom and concern for his daughter, secures her safely with the only other survivor (the pregnant woman, whom he has made subsequent

actions to protect, despite his initial self-serving behavior), before separating himself from Soo-an so that he does not attack her when he “turns.” This is how he earns his redemption.

Seok Woo’s kindness and love for his daughter are fully realized. He has become caring and has “seen” his daughter rather than continuing to ignore or discount her. His identity as her father is complete. To validate this redemption on a psychological level, as he turns into a zombie, his last memory is a positive one. It is the moment immediately after his daughter is born and he is holding her, looking adoringly at her—mindfully “seeing” and truly loving her for the first time.

For the first time in the film, Seok Woo smiles. He has rediscovered “what matters most”—and it is not his work.

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