

How *the* Science  
of Compassion  
Can Heal Your  
Heart & Your  
World

the  
kindness  
cure

“Full of reminders  
of how to enjoy and  
embody a kindful life.”

—JACK KORNFELD,  
author of *The Wise Heart*

TARA COUSINEAU, PhD

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Foreword by STEPHEN POST, PhD

## CHAPTER 1

# Kindness Takes Effort

A month after my daughter, Sophie, got punched in the nose, I had the opportunity to speak with “the happiest man in the world,” Matthieu Ricard, a cherished Buddhist monk, humanitarian, and meditation researcher. I asked him mundane questions about empathy, especially how to help people who feel *too much* empathy. It was a bit of a family curse, I admitted.

“Be glad,” he said.

I lamented that it can be exhausting.

“Yes,” Ricard replied, “but you start with just one thing, close to home, and that is okay. Better to start with too much empathy than too little,” he assured me.

That same week, I visited the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum—effectively expanding my exploration of empathy from mundane to vastly cultural. My mother emigrated to the United States from Germany. She was born in 1938, a poor Catholic girl whose earliest memories were of bomb shelters and near starvation. As a child, my mother had no understanding of the world beyond her neighborhood, where she tended goats and helped make ends meet. The revelations of the Holocaust came much later. Once she made her way to America at nineteen years old, she was bearing a heavy burden of cultural shame. My mother overcompensated by

instilling in her children an intense sense of obligation, of the self-sacrificing variety, to help others. Like me, my daughters inherited this emotional legacy.

At the memorial museum, I became fixated on a display containing children's books, toys, and posters—all intended to indoctrinate children into militarism, racism, and anti-Semitism. Now anything having to do with the Jewish Holocaust brings me to my knees. And I'm not naive to the repetitions in recent history. But the children's books triggered me that day. I reflected on the vast capacity of the human imagination and began wondering whether—if we can mastermind the spread of cruelty—we can mastermind the spread of kindness instead.

My questions about kindness began to shift, from how hard it feels to how we can grow and sustain kindness. With all that is being hailed these days about *neuroplasticity*—the ability of our minds to be shaped by experience, and the ability to shape our minds with experience—it occurred to me that we can lay down neural networks for kindness. We can engage systematic practices that cultivate feelings of compassion and communities of caring.

Matthieu Ricard describes kindness as a mode of altruism, a form of caring and warmhearted consideration that is manifested in how you behave toward others. For Ricard, your natural empathic concern for others can be a catalyst for kindness and compassion, and this can be expanded through various meditative practices and skills. Empathy is a basic connecting point with others that can be experienced on a continuum: it can cause you to be flooded with distress, or you can harness it into kindness. The empathy I refer to in this book is *motivational empathy*—the ability to put yourself in another's shoes and also not get too lost in heightened emotional states that can lead to disempowerment. I'll explain this more in the next chapter; the key point here is that you can use empathy to intentionally expand your awareness of and capacity for kindness.

## What Is Kindness?

*Kindness is love in action.* So let's first look at love. Your love can be the result of a lasting bond, like you have with friends and family. It can also be expressed for any living or nonliving thing, springing forth at any moment in time. Love is the mother of all uplifting emotions and embraces all other positive emotions—amusement, compassion, gratitude, joy, pride, serenity, and so on—under her care that enrich your life and that of others for the better. Kindness is the *conduit* for the vastness of love's expression. It is any act of love that reflects genuine caring. Such kindheartedness is the embodiment of your feelings of warmth and generosity toward others and the world at large—and your desire to bring relief to those who are suffering. In this way, kindness is both a quality of loving presence and an orientation to life that is intentional and active.

This is a message offered by spiritual masters, mystics, and poets: love and kindness are within you, they connect all of us, and they're also larger than us. When such limitless *loving-kindness* is practiced, your relationships with yourself and others lead to authentic happiness and well-being. It is an antidote to fear. Sharon Salzberg teaches how this works: a mind filled with fear can be penetrated and conquered by loving-kindness, and a mind that is infused with loving-kindness cannot be overcome by fear. This kind of unconditional love toward yourself and others is called *mettā* in Buddhist texts. "Mettā—the sense of love that is not bound to desire, that does not have to pretend that things are other than they are—overcomes the illusion of separateness, of not being part of a whole." This type of loving is an expression of kind acceptance. Rather than pushing away difficult feelings or reacting aggressively to change something or someone or the world itself, you can experience a profound happiness that does not depend on external conditions. But the world is constantly testing us, isn't it?

## Under a SPEL: How Stress Erodes Kindness

When you are disillusioned, afraid, or feeling threatened or unsafe, it's hard to engage your kindness instinct. You can become exhausted, indifferent, and uncaring—all states that cause you distress. The natural response to stress is to go into a protective mode. The brain's internal alarm system rings so loudly that your only options are *Fight! Flee! Faint! Freeze!* If it's a matter of survival this is important, as we are built to react quickly to stressors. But when your alarm system switch is stuck so that it's always on, your body can't recover—and stress becomes chronic. You feel worn down physically, mentally, and emotionally in a state we'll discuss more in chapter 10.

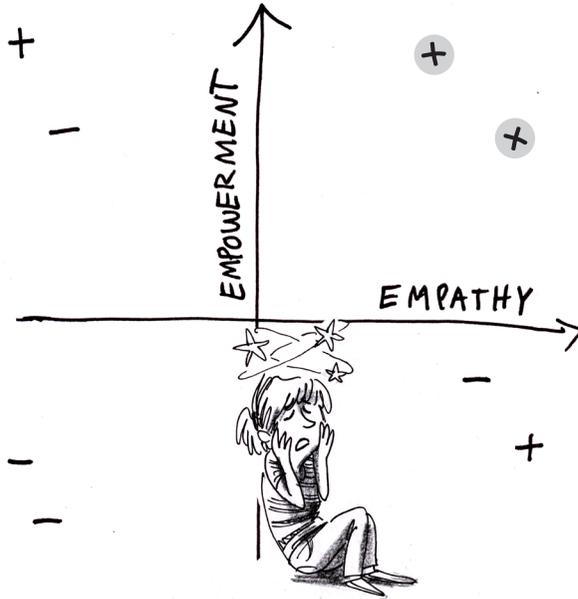
Experts explain that the stress response and its attending negative emotions *narrow* your focus to immediate action. You can become small-minded and mean without even realizing it, as you snap at people, become overly or undeservedly critical, and in general share your negative outlook. On the other hand, positive psychologist Barbara Fredrickson tells us that positive emotions *broaden and build* your inner resources over time, so they serve you well, especially in hard times. They trigger the body's self-soothing system, and you feel safer and calmer. You become able to rest, restore, and revise your mindset toward expansiveness, generosity, love, and kindness.

In a chronic state of personal distress with a narrow view, it's hard to arouse the empathic concern that will help you get perspective on things and be kind toward yourself and others. This erosion of empathy isn't intentional by any means. Stress is like a slow-dripping poison that gradually weakens and disempowers your capacity for empathy and, therefore, for kindness.

I call this effect *Self-Protective Empathy Lethargy*, or SPEL. It creeps up when we are consumed with ourselves: too busy, tired, afraid, overworked,



overwhelmed, tethered to distractions like technology, or simply burned out: basically, too consumed with coping to care. Any of us can get caught under a SPEL, for internal or external reasons. It all comes down to how you respond to the things that trigger stress. Because when you respond to stress well, you awaken from the SPEL, and you realize you can handle any challenge. *The Kindness Cure* guides you toward this awakening.



You get caught under a SPEL when there is an imbalance between empathy and the extent of control, or empowerment, you feel to do something about it. When stressed, overwhelmed, or lacking resiliency, you have fewer inner resources—and therefore less motivation—to feel or be kind. The antidote is to move into a sweet spot, as conveyed on the grid above. Being aware of where you fall on the Empathy-Empowerment Grid can help you reflect more deeply about what might help or hinder kindness in you.

+/+ **High empathy/high empowerment** is a state of caring that results in kind behaviors and a personal commitment to the well-being of others. It is a feeling of empathic concern that is followed by acting in alignment with that feeling to offer things such as a caring presence, affection, or relief. This generosity becomes contagious, the circles of care widen, and social justice is valued. This orientation brings a healthy striving for both the personal and collective good.

+/- **High empathy/low empowerment** is being under a SPEL. The caring impulse toward yourself or others is present, but the ability to be of help and service, or to affect positive change, is short-circuited by real obstacles or personal discomfort, fear, exhaustion, or disillusionment. You are more likely to be in a state of empathic distress or compassion fatigue, which is the inability to tolerate the pain or suffering of others.

-/+ **Low empathy/high empowerment** is a position of power and confidence. You are motivated by selfish goals, act at the expense of others, harbor a disregard for the well-being of others, and view others as outsiders.

-/- **Low empathy/low empowerment** is a state of apathy and isolation. This may happen when faced with a real or perceived threat to survival, pervasive trauma, disengagement from others, or an ingrained sense of learned helplessness. You feel numb, so you can't act.

## Breaking the SPEL by Opening Your Heart

Being kind requires the willingness to open your heart, and it also requires a conscious and sincere effort to be kinder than you already are. Even though you possess a compassionate instinct, your capacity for love and belonging can erode if you don't exercise kindness. To offset erosion, work your way back to kindness. Warding off a SPEL takes effort, courage, and skill. Fairy tales and cultural narratives tell us that spells can be broken—by a true love's kiss, enchanted cloaks, ruby slippers, or enacting

feats that are brave, honest, kind, and selfless. Ultimately, these stories are about waking up to the human experience of love.

There's an elixir of six ingredients that can be blended to break a SPEL and ignite or rekindle your kindness. You can remember this recipe with the acronym PEPIIE—like a vital energy force. Sprinkled throughout this book are PEPIIE examples and exercises that'll inspire and help you to build a potent reserve of these skills. Reflection questions accompany each description to give you a taste of what a kindness cure entails.



**Presence.** You can cultivate this by learning to feel grounded in physical space and in your body, and by tuning in to moment-by-moment experiences that include sensations, emotions, and thoughts. This is a fundamental practice of centering yourself with kind awareness, or *mindfulness*, even when life feels hurried or overwhelming. It's like discovering a golden egg—a vital source of well-being.

*What happens when I follow my breath in and out? What feelings and bodily sensations do I notice right now? What thoughts are streaming through my mind? What do I need to feel safe and supported? Can I notice the moments in my day, the pleasant and unpleasant, without judgment?*

**Emotional regulation.** As you engage your body's natural self-soothing system when feeling upset or aroused, you strengthen your ability to recognize and manage a wide range of emotions—including empathy, a precursor to kindness. The ability to manage emotions fosters social-emotional intelligence, enriches relationships, and results in overall well-being.

*Can I find my center even if my emotions are triggered and my thoughts are scattered or scary? How can I walk in another person's shoes and*

## The Kindness Cure

*not be overcome by emotions? Can I find comfort and support when I need them?*

**Keeping Perspective.** This entails becoming curious about life experiences, learning from them, and imagining new possibilities for kindness, connection, and growth. To see the world in this way is to cultivate your inner coach, wise mind, or higher self. This allows you to expand your field of awareness because you see through the lens of understanding and kindness.

*Can I listen with compassion? Can I contemplate others' points of view, finding common ground even when I disagree? What is the best way I can be of help when I see suffering everywhere I look?*

**Purpose.** When you feel purposeful, you believe in yourself and others, imagine possibilities, find new solutions that bring benefit, identify your values and guiding principles, and act on those principles. A purposeful life gives you the security in yourself to connect with others in open, fearless ways. This emboldens your integrity and strengthens empathy, which allows you to experience and support beauty and dignity among humankind.

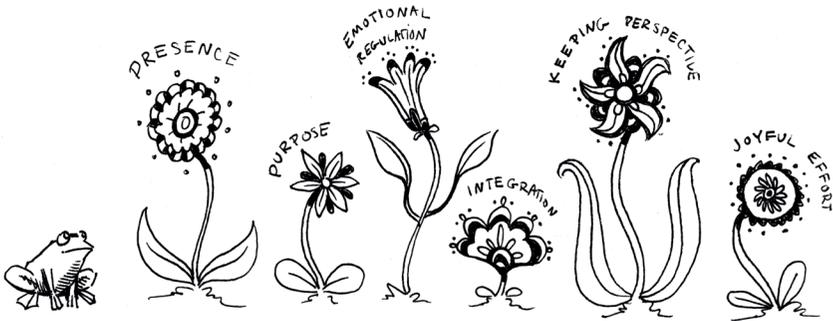
*What is important to me? What are my values? What possibilities do I imagine? What does a meaningful life look like? Could I make it part of my purpose to be a kindness warrior?*

**Integration.** Integration nurtures healthy habits for mind, body, and spirit. A wellspring of inner stable and benevolent strengths will grow as you integrate habits such as learning to appreciate the good moments, feeling safe, caring for yourself, practicing forgiveness and gratitude, listening with compassion, and setting healthy boundaries. Such skills build resilience to bounce back from inevitable setbacks or unforeseen obstacles, so you can perceive the wholeness of life's joys and sorrows.

*What are the tried-and-true ways in which I nurture myself with love and kindness? Are there other things I can do differently to demonstrate how I care for myself and other people?*

Effort. Remember, kindness is love in action. Harness your empowered senses of personal agency, creativity, and inner strength for the good. These attitudes naturally want to engage in efforts that create kindness, compassion, and social justice. You can consciously exert your personal power and take leaps of faith, even when outcomes are uncertain and failure is possible.

*What can I put joyful effort into? How can I be of service to others? Is there a small or big kindness that I can do for myself or someone else? What might I like to try out, create, or collaborate on? How can I connect with others not like me? How can I put love into action?*



As you can see, some of these ingredients are inner ones and some are actualizing ones. The chapters that follow offer you the skills to grow kindness from the inside out.

# The Kindness Cure: How the Science of Compassion Can Heal Your Heart & Your World

Available February 1st, 2018.

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