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THE KINDNESS CONNECTION

DOING UNTO OTHERS IN A POSITIVE WAY CAN ALSO HELP IMPROVE YOUR OWN LEVELS OF HEALTH AND HAPPINESS BY ALYSSA SHAFFER

→ **EVER NOTICE THAT** little burst of positivity you get when you hold the door for a stranger, smile at the checkout cashier or wave the car across from you to make a turn first? Some simply call small acts like these politeness or good manners, but they're also expressions of kindness. And they can go a long way toward making you a happier and more satisfied human.

"We are wired for kindness and compassion," notes Tara Cousineau, Ph.D., a psychologist based in Milton, Massachusetts, and the author of *The Kindness Cure* (New Harbinger Publications, 2017). "These qualities are fundamental to our survival as a species. We would not have thrived over eons without collaborative emotions."

But in our ever-busy world, with pressures at home, work and pretty much everywhere else we turn, our instinct to be compassionate can sometimes be stymied. "When you are under stress, the natural response is to go into a protective mode," says Cousineau. We tend to snap at others and get more caught up in our own needs. "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."

On the other hand, the more you can incorporate kindness into your life, the happier and better you'll feel. "Study after study shows the positive effect of kindness," Cousineau notes. Research by positive psychologist Barbara Fredrickson shows that positive emotions can broaden and build our capacity to have joy and

happiness in our lives. "You begin to develop an upward spiral of positive feelings, so it feels good to do good," Cousineau adds.

There's ample research to back this idea. In a recent study from the University of Zurich, participants were asked to either spend money on others or on themselves. The givers had higher levels of self-reported happiness compared to those who were not as generous. And in a survey of 4,582 adults, 68 percent of those who engaged in volunteer activities for two hours a week (about 100 hours a year) reported that it made them feel physically healthier, 92 percent said it enriched their sense of purpose, 89 percent said it improved

their well-being, 73 percent said it lowered stress and 77 percent felt it improved their emotional health. Other studies have shown that kindness can help improve symptoms related to depression, anxiety and social isolation in teens; improve body image; and strengthen romantic relationships.

Doing nice things for others can also effect real physical change. A 2013 study found that high school students who volunteered for an hour a week helping children in after-school programs had lower levels of

inflammation and cholesterol and a lower body mass index after 10 weeks. And in another 2013 study of 1,100 adults aged 51 to 91, those who volunteered an average of four hours a week were 40 percent less likely to develop hypertension than those who didn't

dedicate time to helping others.

89%

OF PEOPLE SAY VOLUNTEERING 100 HOURS A YEAR IMPROVES THEIR SENSE OF WELL-BEING

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE KIND?

"Kindness is love in action," notes Cousineau. "It's 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.”

In other words, if you want to experience the full benefits of kindness, there needs to be some intent behind your actions. Donating to a coworker who’s doing a charity walk is helpful, but if you don’t derive personal meaning from it, says Cousineau, you may not reap your own benefits. Signing up to walk yourself or helping your coworker prepare by training with her can deepen the experience.

“When we engage in activities that are kind both to ourselves and to others, we feel the full range of positive emotions, and that is what can make real changes in our

physiology,” she adds. “The more we do, the more it will ignite that caring circuitry in our brains.”

CULTIVATING KINDNESS

Most of us want to believe we are kind and have the best intentions to live a compassionate life. But it can be difficult on a daily basis to keep up our emotional empathy. Cousineau suggests a few ways to integrate kindness that can have the biggest effect on your own state of happiness.

START LOCAL

“You don’t have to fly down to help victims of a hurricane or earthquake. If you can help financially, that’s a

good place to start, but is there also a way to be helpful right now?”

asks Cousineau. Maybe that’s asking an elderly neighbor if you can pick up her groceries. Or volunteering to spend an hour a week at the library shelving books or helping at your kids’ school. “You don’t have to be Mother Teresa to make a difference; even

small things in your own neighborhood can have an impact.”

LOVE YOURSELF

“Often you need to start being kind to yourself—it can help you be more resilient, so you can then be better able to help others,” Cousineau says. That can mean anything from taking time to go to the gym to making sure you’re eating healthfully and getting a good night’s sleep. “These are all acts of self kindness that we often neglect to do for ourselves,” she adds.

SAY HI TO A STRANGER

“We tend to be tribal and mostly stick with the people we know or who may look like us,” Cousineau says. You don’t have to go up to someone on the street or subway—it can simply be a matter of introducing yourself to a new employee in your office at a meeting or striking up a conversation in line at the coffee bar.

BE GRATEFUL

There’s ample research that shows counting your blessings makes you

73%
OF PEOPLE SAY
VOLUNTEERING
LOWERS
STRESS LEVELS



Volunteering just a couple of hours a week can yield big benefits.

10 WAYS TO BE KINDER

1

SMILE AT OTHERS.

2

SAY “I LOVE YOU,” OFFER A HUG OR GIVE A HIGH FIVE.

3

CLEAN UP THE DIRTY DISHES IN THE SINK—EVEN IF THEY’RE NOT YOURS.

4

OPEN THE DOOR, BUY A CUP OF COFFEE OR PAY A TOLL FEE FOR SOMEONE.

happier, but it can also make you kinder. “Practicing gratitude is powerful stuff,” Cousineau says. “It makes you feel better, and you can often pass on that spark of positive feelings to those around you.”

MAKE A SMALL TIME COMMITMENT

It doesn't take a lot to reap the benefits of volunteering—just a couple of hours a week can make a difference, both for yourself and for others. Your local religious community is often the perfect place to start, but there are plenty of other organizations that will be happy to have you help. “Find something that resonates with you personally,” Cousineau suggests. “Think about what you would enjoy doing that will also help you derive some sort of meaning.”

SEND A THANK-YOU

Most of us don't often put a pen to paper these days—it's far easier to fire off a text message or e-mail. But sending a thank-you to someone who has recently done a kind act for you or may have helped you in the past can make an impact on them as well as you, says Cousineau. And taking the time to write it out and mail it can make it that much more meaningful.

Taking part in positive acts like volunteering can broaden and build on your capacity for joy.



92%
 OF PEOPLE REPORT THAT VOLUNTEERING ENRICHES THEIR SENSE OF PURPOSE
 SOURCE "RX: IT'S GOOD TO BE GOOD 2017 COMMENTARY: PRESCRIBING VOLUNTEERISM FOR HEALTH, HAPPINESS, RESILIENCE, AND LONGEVITY," BY STEPHEN POST, PH.D., AMERICAN JOURNAL OF HEALTH PROMOTION

5

COMPLIMENT THREE PEOPLE FOR A POSITIVE ATTITUDE OR EFFORTS.

6

PHONE A FRIEND INSTEAD OF JUST SENDING A TEXT—IT'S MUCH MORE INTIMATE.

7

DONATE TO A CAUSE AND LET OTHERS KNOW YOU DID. (KINDNESS IS CONTAGIOUS!)

8

TALK TO A HOMELESS PERSON.

9

VOLUNTEER AT A SOUP KITCHEN OR FOOD BANK.

10

PICK UP TRASH ON YOUR STREET AND IN YOUR 'HOOD.

SOURCE THE KINDNESS CURE, NEW HARBINGER PUBLICATIONS, 2017