

TARA COUSINEAU, PH.D., DISCUSSES HER NEW BOOK, "THE KINDNESS CURE: HOW THE SCIENCE OF COMPASSION CAN HEAL YOUR HEART AND YOUR WORLD."

Milton resident Tara Cousineau is a clinical psychologist, meditation teacher and well-being researcher and social entrepreneur who is dedicated to spreading kindness. The founder of BodiMojo.com, Cousineau develops digital wellness tools for youth and is affiliated with the Center for Mindfulness and Compassion at Cambridge Health Alliance, Cambridge, Massachusetts. She is a mindfulness trainer and chief science officer at Whil, a digital mindfulness company, and serves as a scientific advisor to kindness.org. Her new book, "The Kindness Cure: How the Science of Compassion Can Heal Your Heart and Your World," is out this month (New Harbinger Publications, February 2018)

What inspired you to write "The Kindness Cure"?

One day I found myself asking, "What happened to kindness?" It seemed the world was just falling to pieces, both in my little world raising kids and in the world at large. My frustration spurred me on. As a therapist and researcher, I know that we are wired to care and that empathy is part of our human blueprint. But we must nurture it. We need to practice it. Modern science tells us that we can grow kindness and compassion from the inside out, like a habit. It's largely a matter of where we direct our love and attention. I wrote the book because I wanted to showcase everyday stories that elevate kindness as a core ingredient for well-being and happiness—rather than seeing kindness as sentimental, saccharine or suspect. I wanted to share the science of kindness in a compelling and friendly way.

Is the book aimed at a particular audience?

The book is written for a general audience, for those who feel overwhelmed by the needs and suffering of the world and who are like me: perpetually frustrated by a cool-to-be-cruel culture and passive acceptance of human indignities. We can do better. I purposely included stories from children, teens and adults to show how kindness is natural and how it also takes a lifetime of joyful effort.

Is everyone born with the same kindness quotient?

The way I look at it is that we are all born with a blueprint for caring, kindness and compassion. After all, our species evolved and survived from generation to generation because of a fundamental need for love and belonging. Yet, it is also true that our life experiences, family environment and our core beliefs shape how we express empathy and show kindness.

What are the side effects of being kind?

I define kindness as love in action. A direct effect of being kind is an upswell of positive emotions. Even in moments when a kindness may not be acknowledged or reciprocated, the action and attitude is what matters. Having a kind orientation to life is about understanding that we all belong to one another. Often, we will never know how a kindness may have had a ripple effect. Yet, the benefit is also for us.

Are there benefits to witnessing acts of kindness?

Absolutely! One of the challenges in today's world is that our attention is immediately drawn to dangers and woes. Our news cycle and dramatic entertainment culture feed on media ratings, eyeballs, clicks, shares and likes. Our brains are also wired to scan our environment for threats. This quirky inclination is called the "negativity bias." It is a rather cruel trick of nature that we can find ourselves overloaded with bad news, bad images and bad vibes, when in fact our actual life is not being threatened. It helps to know the difference and we can override this bias. Witnessing acts of kindness and compassion certainly help. Engaging in kind acts and having role models at home, school and in the community also make a big difference. The more we can sense the benefits to others, the more we can offset this "negativity" bias. We need to train ourselves to see and do good in the world. Repetition matters.

What is the best way to deal with unkind people in your life?

We will always have challenging people in our lives, at home, work or in rush-hour traffic. One tip is to not take things so personally. People are often having a bad day that has nothing to do with you. Another tip is to ask yourself, "How can I bring kindness to this moment?" And that may very well be setting a personal boundary, too. Self-kindness is something we also need to practice. That means being mindful of the type of people we want to connect with. I say to my teenage daughters, "Your friends can bring you up or they can bring you down. Choose wisely."

Do you think people are more or less kind than in previous generations?

I think humans are humans. We are capable of cruelty and we are capable of kindness—and everything in between. These days, our attention is much more scattered. We're addicted to business and stress levels are chronically

high. It's easy to become overwhelmed and go into survival mentality or fight-or-flight mode. We can forget to pay attention to the very things that matter and bring us joy. It takes practice to redirect attention to the people and moments we can appreciate in our daily lives. There's a ton of good in the world if we are open to seeing it.

Can you give an example of a scientific study that reveals the benefits of kindness?


Volunteering is really good for well-being and health. This is shown repeatedly. Volunteering is a better preventative than aspirin for heart disease. People who regularly volunteer live longer, and helping others outside your family prevents teenage substance use. Just imagine what 1-2 hours a week could do for you and your community? Another neat scientific observation is that your attitude and behaviors, whether positive or negative, have an impact on others in far-reaching ways. Here's the upside: your act of kindness or generosity will positively influence three people, and those three people will positively influence another three people. There is a social network effect. Keep that in mind the next time you share a post, buy junk food or say something unkind in front of your kids.

Can you share a few simple tips for becoming more kind?

Here are 5 ways to kick-start kindness that may take a little more effort than paying for a toll or buying a stranger a cup of coffee (which is great, but a tad too easy).

1. Compliment three people for their positive attitude or efforts.
2. Say "I love you," offer a hug or give a high five—and mean it.
3. Send a thank-you note or email to one person a week.
4. Get to know someone who is not like you.
5. Set a daily kindness reminder on your phone and track your actions.

Notice what happens over time. A little more kindness in daily life may spread in more ways than you ever imagined.

For more information on "The Kindness Cure" or to take a quiz to discover your own kindness quotient, visit tara-cousineau.com. 

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