

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

the
kindness
cure

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CHAPTER 18

Radical Acceptance

We tend to be conditioned to conform to narrow views of who we should be. We're also taught to judge one another. This is why unconditional acceptance can feel radical. Elyse learned the power of acceptance from her oldest child. "One dream at a time, I began to realize that my child did not get the script that I had written for her life," writes Elyse. "With each symptom that manifested and took over my child—anxiety, depression, stuttering, stammering, hair pulling, skin picking, sleep disorders—each part of my dream was being chipped away."

As Elyse shared her story with me, a mother of two girls, I could only imagine the yearning and the confusion. Elyse had expected princess birthday parties, mani-pedis, and mother-daughter dates—no such luck. When it came time for the father-daughter dance in elementary school, just finding something for her daughter to wear was traumatic. When she got her period, it was a nightmare. Then there were hospitalizations and times when the household was so stressed that Elyse emotionally checked out. After all, she had two younger children who needed her. One day, her fifteen-year-old daughter texted her mom with vital news: *I am a boy.*

After the declaration, as the pain of the past ten years instantly came into focus, Elyse paused for a long time. "Then I said to my kid, 'Let's get your hair cut.' When the hair he never combed anyways was chopped, it

was like a light went on in him. I could see the life coming back, so I thought: *Okay. We can do this.*"

The family was in uncharted territory—Caitlyn Jenner and a nationwide LGBTQ bathroom bill discussion were still to come. So they rallied to learn as much as they could, consulting with experts and doctors. Her son, Landon, was the first trans kid to come out in their neck of the woods—a small, sports-minded, socially conservative community. The school had never been through this situation before, and other parents didn't know how to explain things to their children when one day a classmate showed up with a new name and gender.

It was people's pity that really got to Elyse. She told me, "I had just learned about my kid. I was having lunch with a friend; our kids grew up together. She dropped her eyes and shook her head, saying, 'I feel so bad for you.' I know she meant well because I know her heart, but it bothered me so much I can't even express it. My response was, 'You know what? This is just our path. It doesn't mean there's something wrong with us. It's just a different walk we're taking.'"

Elyse recognizes the challenges others faced, as judgment and prejudice run deep. Yet she chose to stand strong in unwavering love for her child. "I never push my agenda on people," she said to me. "I'm not trying to convince anyone to accept my kid, but if you look at us as human beings, I don't see why you wouldn't. We all really want the same things at the end of the day. We want our kids to be happy and healthy and productive members of society. That's not different for me. I know in my heart if I didn't accept Landon, my kid would be dead. I don't know of any parent who would choose that over clinging to beliefs. Common ground is there if people want to see it."

Listening to Understand

Acceptance begins with the understanding that comes through listening, as Elyse showed when she fully took in the fateful text message. "We think

we listen, but very rarely do we listen with real understanding, true empathy,” said Carl Rogers, the humanistic psychologist. “Yet listening, of this very special kind, is one of the most potent forces for change that I know.” Rogers believed that empathy is not a state of being but a process of deep sensing and listening. And since it is a process, it is something we can practice and cultivate.

Fortunately, life gives us many opportunities to practice what Rogers described as “entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment to moment, to the changing felt meanings that flow in this other person, to the fear or rage or tenderness or confusion or whatever that he or she is experiencing.” With this kind of empathy we come to see as another sees, and everything he or she does makes sense. Just like Elyse, we can reach complete acceptance of another person. As Rogers says, “To be with another in this way means that for a time being you lay aside the view and values you hold for yourself in order to enter another’s world without prejudice.” Allowing someone to be as they are a great act of kindness.

Compassionate Communication

Communicating in ways that foster understanding and acceptance goes far beyond ordinary, everyday communication. It requires a radical transformation of relating. More than forty years ago, Marshall Rosenberg developed a method called *nonviolent communication* (NVC), sometimes referred to as compassionate communication, which has been used in education, psychotherapy, social justice, and conflict resolution situations all over the world.

In our culture, we are conditioned to understand each other in dualistic categories that are static, confining, and deadening because they are moralistic judgments: judgment/reward, good/bad, right/wrong, smart/dumb, normal/abnormal, winner/loser. Rosenberg called this “life-alienating communication” and believed it to be the source of violence.

When fraught with defensiveness, anger, shame, avoidance, or retaliation, communication can kill kindness.

With an emphasis on deep listening and a quality of presence rather than just spoken words, NVC is a radical approach because it allows for a mutual flow of communication. Rather than focusing on personal evaluations, NVC focuses attention on human needs. Because when needs are not met, then anger, depression, guilt, and shame show up. When needs are met, the result is more pleasant, playful, and joyful. Our feelings result from interpreting an experience based on underlying needs: to be accepted, loved, heard, seen, appreciated, touched, safe, independent, creative, inspired. Sometimes we don't know what we need because no one ever asked us and we don't ask each other. We are not taught to be clear about our needs nor how to express our feelings. Once you're aware of underlying needs, then you begin to take responsibility for the feelings, and you care that another person's needs are met. This requires loving patience to step back, to watch and learn, and to restrain from rushing to judgment.



Kindness in Practice: *Connecting with Kindness*

This reflection exercise invites you to consider the ways you have been conditioned to analyze and judge yourself or others. It's also meant to encourage you to explore how you might practice a new way of relating.

Call to mind an encounter in which either you or the other person became upset. It could be a quibble about whose turn it is to take out the trash, a complaint about time spent texting, someone feeling unappreciated, or a perceived criticism. Follow along with the four basic components

of NVC as you reflect on your interaction. As an example, here's how I imagine Elyse might have completed this exercise, considering her exchange with her well-meaning friend, Mary.

Observation. An observation is a clear description of the event. The challenge is to notice the situation without judging it, because if we mix evaluation with observation, it can result in criticism. When we simply observe what happened, the situation remains open.

Evaluation: Mary had the nerve to feel sorry for me.

Observation: Mary said she felt sorry for me.

Identifying and expressing feelings. This means having a diverse vocabulary of feelings, as encouraged in chapter 3, and understanding the difference between feeling and thinking. By taking responsibility for our own feelings when receiving criticism or a negative message, we avoid dropping into the blame game—either of our self or the other person.

Blaming expression: I feel misunderstood. I feel you don't get me at all.

Feeling expression: I'm sad to hear you feel sorry for me, because I was hoping to share how relieved I am that my son is now thriving.

Acknowledging the needs at the root of feelings. We can use jargon or magical thinking to convey our needs, making it hard for other people to perceive what we really need; instead, they hear a criticism or how they may be failing us.

Not taking responsibility: Mary, what you said really bothered me. I need a friend right now, and you're not being one.

Taking responsibility: What I need right now is for someone to hear how I am actually experiencing this change.

Making requests. NVC requests answers to two questions that lead to a joyful and compassionate life: What contributes to our well-being? What would make life more wonderful? Once we can attend to what we observe, feel, and need, we become clear about what specific requests we can make so that others can respond compassionately. That means clearly asking for what we *do want* rather than what we don't want—using positive rather than negative phrasing.

An unclear request: I don't want you to reject me or my son. (This could be stated positively but still be vague: I want you to accept us for who we are.)

A clear request: I want you to tell me that you value our friendship even if my family does some things you don't agree with. Maybe you would be willing to hear me present to parents at the next LGBTQ talk?

Reflecting clarity: Was that clear? ... Am I making sense to you? ... How did you understand what I said? (A simple reflection question framed positively can help everyone reach understanding.)

Remember, people are doing the best that they can with the skills that they have. Being mindful of how we communicate is an important first step. If you are curious to learn more about compassionate communication, you can explore these skills at the Center for Nonviolent Communication.



When we wake up from automatic habits of thoughts and beliefs that are rooted in judgment, we begin to speak from the heart and we begin to relate with kindness. We learn to welcome our own and each other's stammering or silences with more conscious speech. An internal

reckoning takes place. We find it takes time. As we bring compassionate communication into our awareness, we wonder:

What am I reacting to?

What am I feeling in this moment?

If I dig deeper, what needs are connected to what I'm feeling?

Am I making a clear request in a positive way?

Asking these questions marks a turning point: the SPEL is broken and we begin to experience the ingredients of PEPPIE. As Elyse points out, "As humans we need to all do a better job at recognizing our judgments and conditioning, take the extra step to realize there are many paths that lead to the same place and that it's not our job to decide someone else's journey." By being present, managing emotions, and keeping perspective, fertile ground is laid for compassionate understanding.

Reflection: *When I am clear on the needs that underlie my feelings, I can more readily show compassion to myself and others, find common ground, and allow people to be as they are.*

“Grounded in solid research, this book is heartfelt, funny, and so helpful, with tons of practical suggestions and effective tools. Sharp, insightful, and right to the point, Tara Cousineau shows us how live from a strong heart. Highly recommended.”

—**Rick Hanson, PhD**, author of *Hardwiring Happiness*

“A lovely book, replete with simple kindness and full of reminders of how to enjoy and embody a kindful life.”

—**Jack Kornfield**, author of *The Wise Heart*

“This is a wonderful book that focuses on kindness, bringing in work from a variety of different disciplines. If you want to learn to bring more kindness into your life, this book is a good place to start.”

—**Kristin Neff**, author of *Self-Compassion*, and associate professor in the department of educational psychology at The University of Texas at Austin

“Using practical techniques supported by research, Tara offers simple yet powerful exercises that reconnect us to qualities of compassion and kindness, and in the process, incline our minds and hearts to dwell in these states more naturally. *The Kindness Cure* gives us carefully considered, warmly delivered keys to a deeper experience of kindness and connectedness.”

—**Sharon Salzberg**, author of *Real Happiness* and *Real Love*

“If there were a single practice capable of transforming person and planet, it would be kindness. If you were to read a single book on kindness, let it be this one. Blending her expertise in psychology with her deep life experiences, Tara Cousineau offers you a path for cultivating kindness within and without.”

—**Rabbi Rami Shapiro**, author of *The Sacred Art of Lovingkindness*

“Kindness truly connects people across their differences, and is the key ingredient in social change which this book beautifully demonstrates. Through a research lens, Cousineau takes us on a journey that is witty, relatable, and encouraging. It’s a practical guide to understanding just how much kindness can reshape our world for the better. A must-read.”

—**Jaclyn Lindsey**, cofounder and CEO of www.kindness.org

“For many years, Tara Cousineau has shared her message about the power of kindness and compassion to lift others out of the distress and despair of everyday living: from daily hassles to wrestling with inner feelings of low self-worth, and sense of disconnection. Putting her message into a book about our innate ability to care and be kind, and how to nurture this capacity, is timely and much needed. I, for one, would welcome it as a resource for clients and colleagues.”

—**Nancy Etcoff, PhD**, author of *Survival of the Prettiest*, and assistant clinical professor and psychologist at Harvard Medical School and the Massachusetts General Hospital Department of Psychiatry

“Our world is hungry for kindness, and I know Tara Cousineau as someone who is dedicated to inviting more kindness, compassion, and understanding through her writing. I highly recommend *The Kindness Cure* for the wisdom it contains.”

—**Donald Altman**, author of *101 Mindful Ways to Build Resilience*, *The Mindfulness Toolbox*, and *One-Minute Mindfulness*

“We have chased personal success and happiness to the point of exhaustion. No matter how much we achieve or acquire, we come up empty, lonely, bereft. In short, we are in need of a cure. But, as Tara Cousineau so elegantly and thoroughly reminds us, our medicine is in our DNA. We are wired for caring, connection, and compassion. Read *The Kindness Cure* and pass it on. Let the ‘infection of kindness’ begin!”

—**Janet Conner**, author of *Writing Down Your Soul*, *The Lotus and The Lily*, *Find Your Soul's Purpose*, and more

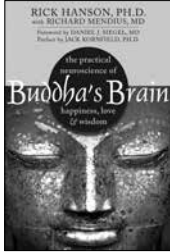
“In her warm and wise voice, Tara Cousineau reminds us that beneath our often frenzied and distracted lives, kindness is at the heart of our being. Even with the practice of mindfulness, life is difficult for everyone. Kindness is an action we can perform in almost every moment; it connects us to others and brightens all our lives.”

—**Susan M. Pollak**, coauthor of *Sitting Together*, and president of The Institute for Meditation and Psychotherapy

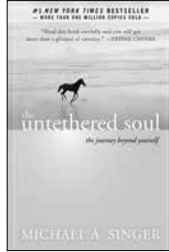
“Tara Cousineau has created a groundbreaking, beautifully written book on kindness. It is a forgotten concept, but one which is vital for our health and well-being, especially in the times we live in now.”

—**Alice Domar, PhD**, coauthor of *Live a Little!* and *Self-Nurture*

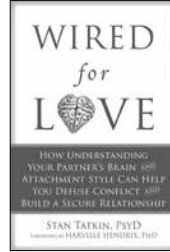
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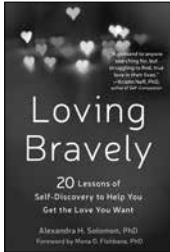
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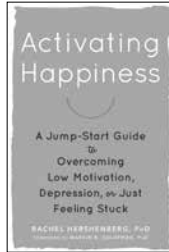
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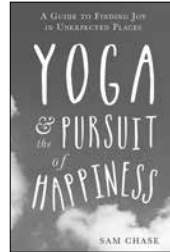
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