

Why Being Kind Helps You, Too— Especially Now

Research links kindness to a wealth of physical and emotional benefits. And it's an excellent coping skill for the Covid-19 era.

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In January, Rachel Glyn's husband of 36 years died of cancer. Two months later, the pandemic and lockdown hit. Alone in her Philadelphia apartment, Ms. Glyn spent her time worrying about the coronavirus, the financial markets and the civil unrest happening a few blocks away. Some days, she says, she wished she would die. "I'll never have another day that doesn't stink," she told herself.

Then one morning, Ms. Glyn, who is 66, heard about a local blood drive and thought, "My life isn't a pathetic mess after all: I have the ability to give." She walked to a nearby hospital and donated. Afterward, she was "exhilarated," she says.

"It felt wonderful to do something useful for someone," Ms. Glyn says. "I no longer was this nobody who has nothing to do except endure a wretched situation."

Want to feel better? Be kind.

It's a good thing to make another person feel good. But being kind—doing something to help someone else—can help you, too. Research links kindness to a wealth of physical and emotional benefits. Studies show that when people are kind, they have lower levels of stress hormones and their fight-or-flight response calms down. They're less depressed, less lonely and happier. They have better cardiovascular health and live longer. They may be physically stronger. They're more popular. And a soon-to-be published study found that they may even be considered better looking.

Being kind is an excellent coping skill for the Covid-19 era. In a time of isolation, kindness fosters connection to others. It helps provide purpose and meaning to our life, allowing us to put our values into practice. And it diminishes our negative thoughts. "Our attention isn't something that is infinitely expansive," says Emiliana Simon-Thomas, science director of the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley. "What we are feeling at any given moment is related to what we are doing, so if we are behaving kindly, that experience will occupy our emotion."

Psychologists call kindness altruism and talk of two types: reciprocal (you help someone because it will benefit you in some way—like giving money to get a tax break) and pure (you have no expectation of reward). Humans evolved to do both. We're not the biggest, strongest or fastest

animal in the kingdom, so we needed to band together to survive. “The key to our success is not the survival of the fittest,” says Jamil Zaki, a neuroscientist and associate psychology professor at Stanford. “It’s survival of the friendliest.”

Of course, some people are kinder than others—specifically, people born with the personality trait of empathy. Yet, nature accounts for just half of our propensity to be kind, says Dr. Zaki. The rest is nurture—we learn it from our parents, our family and our community. And we can also teach ourselves. “Kindness is a skill we can strengthen, much as we would build a muscle,” says Dr. Zaki, who is the author of “The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World.”

Kindness can even change your brain, says Stephanie Preston, a psychology professor at the University of Michigan who studies the neural basis for empathy and altruism. When we’re kind, a part of the reward system called the nucleus accumbens activates—our brain responds the same way it would if we ate a piece of chocolate cake. In addition, when we see the response of the recipient of our kindness—when the person thanks us or smiles back—our brain releases oxytocin, the feel-good bonding hormone. This oxytocin boost makes the pleasure of the experience more lasting.

It feels so good that the brain craves more. “It’s an upward spiral—your brain learns it’s rewarding, so it motivates you to do it again,” Dr. Preston says.

Are certain acts of kindness better than others? Yes. If you want to reap the personal benefits, “you need to be sincere,” says Sara Konrath, a psychologist and associate professor at the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, where she runs a research lab that studies empathy and altruism.

It also helps to expect good results. A study published in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* in 2019 showed people who believed that kindness is good for them showed a greater increase in positive emotions, satisfaction with life and feelings of connection with others—as well as a greater decrease in negative emotions—than those who did not.

How can you be kind even when you may not feel like it? Make it a habit. Take stock of how you behave day to day. Are you trusting and generous? Or defensive and hostile? “Kindness is a lifestyle,” says Dr. Konrath.

Start by being kind to yourself—you’re going to burn out if you help everyone else and neglect your own needs. Remember that little acts add up: a smile, a phone call to a lonely friend, letting someone have the parking space. Understand the difference between being kind and being nice—kindness is genuinely helping or caring about someone; niceness is being polite. Don’t forget your loved ones. Kindness is not just for strangers.

And if there’s no opportunity to be kind at the moment, recall a time when you were generous or helpful. Research suggests that remembering past acts of kindness can also increase your well-being.

In reporting this column, I heard from many people who are trying to be extra kind since the pandemic started. They are taking meals to elderly neighbors, then watering their plants; mentoring teenagers stuck at home; leaving bigger tips for restaurant staff; stopping to let other drivers into traffic more often.

Deirdre Moran posts a joke each day on the phone pole in front of her house in South Brunswick, N.J. Many are “cringeworthy,” she says. (“Can a frog jump as high as an average tent? Of course! A tent can’t jump.”) But Ms. Moran, who teaches at a local school, has seen neighbors take pictures of the jokes and once received a note reminding her that she forgot to post a new one that day.

Kat Vellos and her partner exchange gifts with their older neighbors, leaving gingerbread cookies, lemon blueberry cake and homemade granola on the fence between their homes. They’ve received lemons, herbs and tomatoes from their neighbors’ garden, an extra bag of flour, and a bouquet of flowers in return. “There are innumerable ways to share moments of connection even when you can’t get together in person,” says Ms. Vellos, a digital product designer in Berkeley, Calif.

Mary Gossman keeps a table outside her front door with a cooler full of cold water and a basket of snacks for the mail and delivery people. She sometimes pays for the meal of the person behind her in line at fast-food restaurants and gives gift cards to cashiers at the grocery store. “There are so many things we can do—they don’t all have to be grand gestures,” says the retired office manager from Homestead, Fla.

Ms. Glyn has looked for more ways to help others since she donated blood. She thanks people for their advice and tells them how it helped her. She crochets gifts for family members, most recently shawls for her daughters-in-law. And she posts encouraging messages to strangers who share sweet or poignant stories in the online comments section of the newspaper.

“Maybe if I give someone strength that person will be empowered to go out and do something very special,” says Ms. Glyn. “Kind deeds can produce more kind deeds.”

Want to Be Kinder? Here’s How.

Make it a habit. Earmark time in your schedule to help someone else. Volunteer. Donate. Call a friend. Bake for a neighbor.

Lower the bar. Kindness doesn’t have to be a big deal. Practice being kind each time you go out—smile at people and say hello. Text a friend who is struggling. Take out a neighbor’s garbage. “It can take a minute and cost nothing to change someone’s day,” says Jamil Zaki, associate psychology professor at Stanford.

Be kind to yourself. “If you try to be kind to others while being cruel to yourself, you will burn out,” Dr. Zaki says.

Make small talk. In a time of isolation, this can brighten someone’s day. Say hello. Remark on the shared experience. (“Crazy weather we’re having.”) “Just acknowledging another person’s

common humanity is an act of kindness,” says Emiliana Simon-Thomas, science director of the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley.

Change it up. Research shows that doing a variety of kind acts makes you happier, says Sara Konrath, an associate professor at the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy. Remember your loved ones. Kindness isn’t just for strangers. When you’re kind to the people you live with, “everyone reports being in a better mood and having more positive emotions,” says Stephanie Preston, a professor of psychology at the University of Michigan.

Look for role models. Emulate them.

Don’t get discouraged. Sometimes other people don’t respond in kind. This doesn’t mean they didn’t appreciate your effort. Remind yourself of another time it went well. Keep going.

Recall previous acts of kindness. Research suggests that remembering past acts of kindness also increases your well-being.

Teach your children. Model kind behavior.

Recognize others’ kindnesses. Thank them. Share on social media. It’s easy to pay attention to people who are loud and mean. Elevate the voices of people who are quiet and caring. “When we make kindness visible, we also make it contagious,” Stanford’s Dr. Zaki says.