

Developing Empathy through “Random Acts of Kindness”

“When have I given of myself without expecting anything in return?”.

A Random Act of Kindness is doing something nice for someone else, without either of them asking you or without you doing it for anything in return! And unlike an emotion such as happiness, or a feeling and action like gratitude, kindness is mostly a behaviour or action, it is a doing that is experienced.

There are not only benefits to the receiver but also the giver, as a result of random acts of kindness. Let’s first look at the emotions associated with random acts of kindness.

1. Recipients of kindness can feel that they are loved and cared for.
2. Recipients and givers of kindness can experience awe when they think about profound acts of love or virtue.
3. Whether you are recipient or giver or merely just a witness, there are the benefits of an increase in oxytocin (the “love hormone”) which helps lower blood pressure, improves overall heart health, increases self-esteem and optimism.
4. Kindness can increase our strength and energy due to the act of helping others.
5. Kindness can make us feel calmer.
6. When we generate and act of kindness to others, we feel less depressed.
7. It also results in feelings of greater self-worth.
8. For those that volunteer time and/or money to charity, they often experience fewer aches and pains.
9. Kindness creates serotonin, the “feel-good” hormone that provides healing and calms feelings.
10. Kindness decreases pain, through the generation of endorphins (the brain’s natural painkiller).
11. People who are kinder have been shown to carry 23% less cortisol (the stress hormone) and age slower than the average population.

12. In a University of British Columbia study of a group of highly anxious individuals. Having the participants perform a minimum of 6 acts of kindness per week, resulted in, after a month, a significant increase in positive mood, relationship satisfaction and a decrease in social avoidance.
13. Depression is reduced, mortality delayed, well-being and good fortune increase when we give of ourselves. An act of kindness creates elevated levels of dopamine – this is the source of the natural ‘high’. Just try it as an experiment for yourself and notice how you feel.
14. The lowering of blood pressure from ‘giving’, creates emotional warmth, which releases oxytocin triggering the release of a chemical called nitric oxide, which dilates the blood vessels, reducing blood pressure. As well as being known as the ‘love hormone’, oxytocin is also “cardioprotective”, protecting the heart by lowering blood pressure. And the release of oxytocin, reduces the levels of free radicals and inflammation in the cardiovascular system – keeping you ‘young at heart’

Kindness and the Brain

How connections are built in the brain is illustrated by this example:

- When physically moving the right arm, new connections are created in the motor cortex within the brain. Interestingly enough, by just thinking about moving your right arm, and imagining that you are moving it repeatedly, will make the muscles in the arm stronger.
- Because of these thoughts about the arm, cellular changes happen in the brain and the muscle. So, thinking creates chemical reactions occur in the brain that led to structural changes.
- In this way, we can create millions of new connections in our brains just by thinking compassionate thoughts.

The structure of our brains is impacted by our emotions, thus our inspirations, motivations, loves, fears, hopes, and dreams, and typical body language responses, are all wired into the brain in the form of connections between the cells.

This is how our acts of kindness, impact the chemistry and structure of the brain. And if kindness becomes a habit, the result is a significant altering in the brain’s wiring.

Throughout life, as we learn new things, grow, change our minds and habits, new networks of new brain connections are laid down and old networks unravel. Every time we interrupt a habit, the connectivity is weakened and every time we repeat – it is strengthened. Until late last century it was mostly thought that the brain was ‘fixed’, however this process of

neuroplasticity, is how we are able to shift our past responses, and re-wire for new, more beneficial ones. Its main benefits are that it enables the brain to repair injury and heal from disease, through a process of healthy brain cells compensating for damaged ones by creating new connections that over some of the old communications or passing information through the brain by a different route than before.

We can change this wiring through simple acts of kindness and making them a habit.

“No kind action ever stops with itself. One kind action leads to another. Good example is followed. A single act of kindness throws out roots in all directions, and the roots spring up and make new trees. The greatest work that kindness does to others is that it makes them kind themselves.” Amelia Earhart

Kindness and Acts of Kindness

What follows are a number of clips that are useful in understanding the impact of acts of kindness.

- The Science of Kindness: <https://youtu.be/O9UByLyOjBM>
- TED TALK. How an act of Kindness each day will change your life: <https://youtu.be/pGgnyj8Oyvo>
- TED TALK. Why it's important to be kind to others and our self. <https://youtu.be/igCjBFTTiNI>
- TED TALK. The Power of Kindness. <https://youtu.be/DawgEK9muY>
- Kindness Boomerang. <https://youtu.be/nwAYpLVyeFU> “one day”
- Loving Kindness Meditation. <https://youtu.be/sz7cpV7ERsM>

Being Kind to Ourselves

Many of us are hard on ourselves. Particularly those who may be overachievers and / or hold a fear of failure as a core driver. So, the term ‘be kind to yourself’ isn’t always as easy as it sounds. We are often our own biggest bullies – so how to start with ourselves? Let’s begin:

- Notice the kinds of thoughts that run through your mind in the course of a day. What is your inner critic saying? - and at the end of the day stand back and review, assess the ways you are unkind to yourself.
- Next, choose to notice and then see to stop that thought, and replace it with another kinder thought. Give yourself a hug and tell yourself – ‘it’s going to be ok!’ ‘I am ok!’

Recognise that this tendency to be hard on the self, is quite usual – particularly when we are faced with inevitable life challenges. Recognise and accept both positive and negative emotional states as being a natural part of being human. To try out some practical

exercises that support the 'be kind to self' intention please click on the [Link to Daily Acts of Kindness to Self](#)

Being Kind to Others

In earlier times, when we lived in smaller communities and villages, strangers were often treated with suspicion. We cared for our neighbours and family, and it was a struggle to survive. There was little left for reaching out to those unknown to us. However, these days there are very few who live with those we've known our whole life, and on whom we are dependent for our lives. Today, sadly we often don't even know our neighbours and the majority of the planet lives in urban environments designed to create isolation and loneliness

Yet, no human being is an Island. We live on this planet with over 7 billion other souls – most of whom are and will always be strangers to us. How can we uplift the life of others and also spread greater peace and connection? We do this through practicing kindness to strangers. Being kind to strangers, creates greater connection to others and the world in which we all live. It challenges our preconceptions and biases, and also can take our mind off our own self obsessions and our own troubles. It makes us more appreciative for what we have.

To perform an act of kindness for someone you probably will never see again, has the power to change that person's life, even though there is no possibility of any reward for you, the effect of that kindness will help create a kinder, more peaceful world.

For some ideas on how to do this please click on the [Link to Being Kind to Strangers](#)

Then there are those we choose to have in our life, more closely. Those who are friends and family. It is however very easy for us to take those people for granted. And at the extreme be neglectful and unkind to those we love. In this 21st century everyone is busy busy busy and arranging a catch up with a friend can seem to take months. A visit to parents or other family member who live elsewhere gets put on the back burner. And we sometimes even have very little time for those we live with.

The definition of success, drives us to work longer hours, harder, sleep with our phones next to our beds, as we strive to put food on the table and pay the mortgage or rent – and/or get a bigger salary, a bigger more important job, more material possessions etc.)

All of this detracts from living a balanced life. A life 'well lived' as it is called.

Such a life is based on a redefinition of our usual striving to focus on the intangible. How much we've learned, how much joy we've experienced or provided for others, what we've done to make a difference in the world. For some thoughts on how to bring more balance through being kinder to those we love please click on the [Link to Being Kinder to those we Love](#)

Kindness on Social Media and when there are Disagreements

The internet and social media are both a boon and a curse. They allow us to research information and develop knowledge, find long lost friends, and enjoy the myriad of creative clips that are posted on people's web and social media pages. The downside as we know is the increasing polarisation of commentary on these platforms.

There is a huge gap between the way people would converse or discuss a topic in person and how they will act online. Judgments, aggression, rudeness, and downright hostility are becoming more and more common. Yet, there is an enormous opportunity for this to change, for the better.

It is possible to use social media to keep track of our own acts of kindness, and to also follow other's acts of kindness and show appreciation for them. There are numerous pages where uplifting stories are posted about animal rescues, community outreach and upliftment, environmental care, and concern – to name a few.

As we observe other's posting selfies showing beautiful and happy scenes, paradise holidays, celebrations of achievements it is not surprising that a side effect of social media is the thought that others are living the best life, and ours doesn't match up. This can be depressing. One way of coping with this is to unfollow anyone who is making you feel bad about yourself.

On the other hand, the daily dose of trauma, disasters and ecological crises may have us falling deeper into despair that the world and humanity are doomed. There are of course, terrible things happening and ignoring them won't change that, however, we can all improve our outlook and even make a difference by shifting our mindsets through consciously choosing where we place our attention. If your kind that the struggles you are noticing online is sucking the joy and life out of you, then it is time for a change.

The internet and social media can be a great platform for positive action and upliftment. This is done by our focusing more on the positive, the good news and positive information. We have a choice in what we follow and what we share. For a week, only select 'good news' and positive things to follow on-line. Make a note of this experience and how it impacts your overall mood.

For some guidelines to up your kindness online, please click on the [Link to Be Kind Online.](#)

Opinions and disagreements are a normal part of life, and yet we all say we are wanting a more peaceful world. It seems that there has always been conflict and war – as if as humans it is part of our DNA, and we can't do anything to shift it. However, the peace we all wish for starts with each of us. And it begins with a choice we can all make to behave differently in our own lives. It isn't easy – when faced with someone who is irritating, or who has different values, is offending or provoking you, it's so much easier to react.

The starting point, therefore, is to choose to be kinder to those with whom we disagree.

How does this work? How do we choose to demonstrate peace and kindness when our deepest beliefs are confronted? Our being offended and increasing tension by trying to change the minds of others rarely if ever works. And, what about their rights? And, what if you yourself are actually wrong? And your opinion or world view could do with some upgrading? Is it possible for those who disagree to learn from each other?

For some approaches for treating those you disagree with – with kindness, please click on the [Link to Be Kind Online](#).

For many who work, kindness and the workplace are not often thought of as being mutually exclusive. We work, we earn a salary. That's it! Or is it? The Gallop Poll on Employee Engagement consistently echoes that people are wanting more from their work lives. More than just a pay cheque at the end of the month. They are looking for meaningful work, contributing and of course appreciation and recognition. And this is where kindness@work comes in.

We are working longer and longer hours and the opportunity to be happy and enjoy ourselves both outside and inside our work is something all of us would appreciate. If we attempt to make our working lives happier for ourselves and those around us, then surely this will create more harmony and an environment where our productivity is likely to increase – due to our level of engagement. Thus, work provides a huge opportunity for us to practice kindness. Ideas that will create a kinder work experience are to be found by please clicking on the [Link to Kindness@work](#)

And finally, if we are seeking to establish a kinder world, we cannot forget the children. There is a whole movement of teaching kindness in schools, including world kindness day which is observed annually. Kindness is the antidote to bullying and thus is a very important element in a child's development. It is a huge topic in its own right, however for these purposes what follows are some ideas that you can use with children to promote the spread of kindness.

Here is a small clip that looks at kindness and daily random acts of kindness through the eyes of a child. Here is at:

<https://youtu.be/lrSkDX2ELmU>

What follows, and a range of other resources are found on the 'teachstarter' website.

[Painting Kindness Rocks for a Kindness Rock Garden](#)

Find a range of smooth small rocks, or purchase from a craft or garden shop.



The kindness rocks can be used by self-selecting; selecting in pairs and giving to each other; or as thank you.... The opportunities are endless

Brainstorm a list of kind words to put onto the rocks. Plan rock design and colours



Make a dedicated place for the kindness rock garden.

Use acrylic paints, to colour the rocks. You will need a number of coats. When dry, use permanent markers to write motivational words on the rocks



Kindness Rock Garden

It is also nice to do symbols, such as hearts or flower motifs without words

This is an idea that can be used in the classroom and also in the home as a whole family activity. In a family context a physical place in the home can be selected to house the garden – and a daily ritual of kindness instituted along with the opportunity for spontaneous sharing depending on what is happening in the home. It is strongly recommended that if doing this at home, that all the family build the rock garden and also participate in the use of it. You will find that it is a lovely practice of recognition for all family members.

Complement Filled Kindness Box

Using a cardboard box, cut out a slot large enough for an adult hand to fit in. Cover the box in bright coloured paper, and cover with store bought stickers or clip art cut outs



Anytime a child has a complement for another – student, teacher, family member (if doing this at home). They write a card and drop it in the box. Periodically the box is emptied, and the card given to the appropriate person.

Using a label template (from word or powerpoint) and coloured internet drawings or clip art to craft a complement card format in a soft copy format



Kindness Filled
Complement Box

Print out number pages of the soft copy complement cards and cut them up. Keep in a location close to the box

This is an idea that is also relevant for the workplace – though the imagery may be more adult. It is a process whereby colleagues can acknowledge each other.

In school, home, and the workplace it is often a nice ritual to have the person receiving the complement to read it out. In this circumstance, in order for no one to feel that they have been left out – it is a good idea to provide the opportunity for each individual to write a complement to each other person. Then the cards are all pulled out, someone creates a

pile of cards for each person, and then that person stands and reads to everyone else what is written – taking the cards one by one.

And finally – as Kindness is a counter to bullying in all arenas of life – we know it doesn't just happen in the home, at school but also in the workplace. Let's finally remind ourselves to be conscious about how we show up in our own lives – and seek to be kinder.

Take a few moment to see this clip from IKEA of an experiment that shows in a powerful way the impact of not doing so. Bully A Plant : Say no to Bullying

<https://youtu.be/Yx6UgfQreYY>

All of these ideas and elements about the application of kindness, can as you have seen, be applied to self, or others. And along with gratitude can radically shift the mindset and worldview of an individual who is trapped in negativity or who has limited empathy either for themselves or others.