

Power of kindness

Understanding what it is and the benefits that it generates for us, why it is even more relevant for us now and how we can live more kindly



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What do we mean by kindness?

Kindness can be defined as being “friendly, generous and considerate to both ourself and others” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2001).

Rather than it being seen as a weakness, being kind requires us to show courage and strength. It involves the willingness to celebrate and give attention to someone else. It includes acting and speaking in a compassionate way to others and ourselves (Kauler, 2018).

Kindness can take many forms, it may be a smile to someone, letting someone into a traffic queue or taking time to write a thank you note to show gratitude.

Whilst undertaking a kind gesture can take just a few seconds, being kind towards ourselves and others helps us in many ways.

There is a science behind kindness

Here, we can draw on Alain de Botton's work on pleasure versus happiness. Being kind can help us to cultivate happiness.

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“Kinder people are happier people.”

When we look at what brings us pleasure, we can see that pleasure is short-lived, it is something that can be achieved alone and involves taking. It can be gained through substances and to its extreme, pleasure can lead to addiction (De Botton, 2020).

In contrast, when we consider what brings us happiness, it tells a very different story. We can see that happiness is longer-lasting, it is something that is cultivated through relating to others and it involves giving, being kind. Happiness can't be gained through substances, and can't be addictive (De Botton, 2020).

Behind this, there is physiological response playing out through the release of different hormones.

Pleasure leads to a dopamine response, the feel-good hormone. However, happiness leads to the release of both oxytocin and serotonin. Oxytocin and serotonin are behind many of the physiological and emotional benefits that have been attributed to being kind, including helping us to heal, to feel connected and to belong.

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What benefits does being kind give us?

This increased release of oxytocin can help us to improve ourselves physiologically through lowering our blood pressure and improving our heart health, and reducing pain (The Science of Kindness Foundation). It can also improve our resilience through strengthening our immune system.

Furthermore, the increase in serotonin, can help us with our mental well-being through increasing our self-esteem and optimism, and reducing depression and anxiety. As well as calming us down, being kind leaves us feeling safe (Mary Portas, 2019). In addition, it can help us to heal, create energy and even live longer:

“For those of us over 55 years old, if we volunteer for two or more organisations, we lower our likelihood of dying early by 44%.”

Christine Carter, 2011

It has a stronger effect than exercising four times a week or visiting church.

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As well as benefitting ourselves, kindness has a multiplier effect. If we perform an act of kindness to others, it spreads. Other people in turn are more likely to be kind. Kindness begets kindness (Kauler, 2018). So, it can have a ripple effect of strengthening our communities beyond just ourselves.

“There is a miracle with being kind; it is contagious.”

Psychology Today, 2017

Being kind is an essential part of being human, it can lift us spiritually. It can lead to equality, equity and equilibrium. It helps us to assume a simpler and more equitable world (Pamela Bell, 2020), and find more meaning.

Why is it even more relevant now?

Millennials (aged 26-41) have become a most powerful consumer group (Shaw, 2019). They are demanding change in how we as a society act, with kindness being central.

40% of respondents of Deloitte's Millennial Survey want the goal of business to improve society (Shaw, 2019). It is the beginning of a new era (IFA, 2020):

“To reuse, recycle, restore, regenerate, respect and care is called ‘The Kindness Economy’”

Portas, 2019

Emerging in the 2010s (Shaw, 2019), the term ‘kindness economy’ is where businesses care for everyone impacted by

their brand, including employees, customers, wider social groups and the planet.

Also, it makes business sense. Businesses within the purpose-driven B corporation movement are growing 28 times faster than national economic growth of 0.5%. Whilst price still matters for consumers, so is how a company impacts people and the planet (Shaw, 2019), leaving our world a better place.

Living a kinder life

Small acts of kindness each day can make a significant impact on ourselves and others.

“We cannot do great things on this earth, only small things with great love.”

Mother Teresa

In these small steps, is important to start with ourselves:

Self-awareness – noticing our inner voice, we can be our own worst critic

Generosity – giving ourself time, disconnecting from technology and spending time in nature

Avoid comparison – being aware of this, often this is a route to negativity

Recharge – having time to restore our own energy levels, this isn't selfish, it is a necessity

“Be kind whenever possible, it is always possible.”

Dalai Lama

As well as ourselves, we can show kindness to others:

Awareness – being conscious of the opportunities we can show kindness

Non-judgement – letting go of our negative judgements

Action – being essential to showing kindness

Unconditional – having no expectation of reward. Our real reward is our inner positivity rather than external recognition

Resources



The School of Life: An Emotional Education

By Alain de Botton

ISBN: 978-0241985830

Welcome to the Kindness Economy - TED Talk, 2019

By Mary Portas



About the writer

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Cathy Brown is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist, consultant and writer. She runs Evolve Consulting Services Limited which works with individuals, teams and businesses to manage transition and change.

She works as a transition coach and a career counsellor with individuals and teams. She is also a guest lecturer at Henley Business School and University of Derby. In addition, Cathy is a founding trustee of the Evolve Transition Trust, which supports disadvantaged people through life transitions.