

Five Research-Based Reasons to Be Kind

By Peter Field

There can be few things that pay as big a dividend as simple acts of kindness. Selfless acts of giving, be it a smile, a word of encouragement, or the offer of a helping hand, result in an emotional uplift not only for others, but also for our self.

Research has shown what we ourselves may instinctively know -- kindness can be a major contributor to the levels of happiness any of us experience.

Kindness Is Inbuilt

Performing acts of kindness may well be a choice, but the ability and the tendency to be kind appear to be something innate, something that we have even in infancy.

Research conducted by Dr. Michael Tomasello of the Max Planck Institute, demonstrated that children begin to help others at an astonishingly early age. [1] For example, a 14-month-old child seeing an adult experience difficulty, such as struggling to open a door because their hands are full, will automatically attempt to help.

In other words, when we perform acts of kindness, we are being true to our own nature, and this naturally makes us feel good.

Kindness Can Have Positive Effects On The Brain

Not only does kindness make us and others feel good, studies have demonstrated that the psychological benefits of kindness are actually reflected in the neural circuitry of the brain. [2]

When we allow ourselves to be kind, regularly engaging in random acts of kindness, we create neural pathways that enhance feelings of well-being and the natural flow of feel-good endorphins and mood elevating neurotransmitters.

Kindness Can Actually Help You Live Longer

Some remarkable benefits can be reaped by those who engage in kindness. In one 2003 study, University of Michigan psychologist Dr Stephanie Brown found that people who regularly offered practical help to others had a lower risk of dying over a five-year period than those who did not. [3]

One interesting aspect revealed by this study was that those who received help showed no reduction of death risk. Only those who practiced kindness reaped the longevity benefits.

Kindness Is Contagious

A fascinating feature of kindness is that it appears to be self-replicating, inspiring kindness in others. Simply put, when we ourselves perform an act of kindness, this is likely to encourage others to act in a similar way.

One study conducted by researchers at Cambridge University, the University of Plymouth and the University of California LA, found that seeing someone else help another person produced good feelings, which subsequently caused them to reach out and do something altruistic themselves. [4]

When we are kind, we help make our world a kinder place to live in.

Kindness Makes You Happier

If all of the above reasons aren't enough to convince you to behave in a kinder way, consider this: Kindness actually does make you happier.

A study, conducted by a University of Pennsylvania research team headed by Dr. Martin Seligman looked at the effects of writing a thank you letter and personally delivering it to someone who had never been properly thanked for their kindness. In other words, performing an act of kindness and gratitude towards someone who had themselves been kind. Participants who did this were able to immediately exhibit a massive increase in happiness scores, with benefits lasting for a month after. [5]

Another recent study, conducted by the Department of Psychology of Tohoku Gakuin University in Japan, looked into the relationship between kindness and happiness. The results indicate that happiness was increased simply by counting kindnesses performed over the course of a week, an exercise that also increased both kindness and gratitude in the participants. [6]

The Bottom Line On Kindness

With research to back it up, it seems clear that doing good for others can also do good for us. It's a habit that can be developed anywhere, at any time, at little or no cost. Actively work on this, make it a habit, and your happiness quota will automatically sky rocket.

"There is no need for temples; no need for complicated philosophy," said the Dalai Lama, spiritual head of Tibetan Buddhism. "Our own brain, our own heart is our temple; the philosophy is kindness."

Practice a philosophy of kindness and you will retrain your brain and alter your mind, making for a better relationship with yourself as well as with others. This is sure to bring greater happiness and joy into your life.

Above all, be kind to yourself! See yourself as a person of worth; doing the best you can with what you have. You are human. Like every other person, you also have your emotional baggage, and you're working to unpack it. What we can handle varies from day to day. Acknowledge that you're continuing to grow into the person you're becoming, and that the person you are also

deserves the benefit of the doubt. Remember that you, too, deserve your own generosity, compassion and kindness.

Kindness is one of the most important habits we can develop on our journey to real and sustainable happiness. It is an essential key to a life lived creatively: one in which we remain healthy physically, mentally, and emotionally. Kindness costs little but pays huge dividends in our own lives and in the lives of those we touch. It's a habit that paves the way to a happy life.

*"The simplest acts of kindness are far more powerful
than a thousand heads bowing in prayer." -- Mahatma Gandhi*

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