

The Beneficial Side Effects of Kindness

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*"If you haven't any charity in your heart, you have the worst kind of heart trouble."
--Bob Hope*

When we think of side effects, the first thing that springs to mind are the side effects of drugs. But who'd have thought that kindness could have side effects, too?

Well, it does! And positive ones at that.

Of course, we should never do an act of kindness to gain from it. We should always be kind because it's the right thing to do. But when we are kind, the following are some side effects that come with it:

1) Kindness makes us happier.

When we do something kind for someone else, we feel good. On a spiritual level, many people feel that this is because it is the right thing to do and so we're tapping into something deep and profound inside us that says, "This is who I am."

On a biochemical level, it is believed that the good feeling we get is due to elevated levels of the brain's natural versions of morphine and heroin, which we know as endogenous opioids. They cause elevated levels of dopamine in the brain, so we get a natural high, often referred to as "Helper's High."

2) Kindness gives us healthier hearts.

Acts of kindness are often accompanied by emotional warmth. Emotional warmth produces the hormone oxytocin in the brain and throughout the body. Of much recent interest is its significant role in the cardiovascular system.

Oxytocin causes the release of a chemical called nitric oxide in blood vessels, which dilates (expands) the blood vessels. This reduces blood pressure, and therefore oxytocin is known as a "cardio-protective" hormone because it protects the heart (by lowering blood pressure). The key is that acts kindness can produce oxytocin, and therefore kindness can be said to be cardio-protective.

3) Kindness slows aging.

Aging on a biochemical level is a combination of many things, but two culprits that speed the process are free radicals and inflammation, both of which result from making unhealthy lifestyle choices.

But remarkable research now shows that oxytocin (which we produce through emotional warmth) reduces levels of free radicals and inflammation in the cardiovascular system and thus slows aging at its source. Incidentally these two culprits also play a major role in heart disease, so this is also another reason why kindness is good for the heart.

There have also been suggestions in the scientific journals of the strong link between compassion and the activity of the vagus nerve. The vagus nerve, in addition to regulating heart rate, also controls inflammation levels in the body in what is known as the inflammatory reflex. One study that used the Tibetan Buddhist lovingkindness meditation found that kindness and compassion did, in fact, reduce inflammation in the body, mostly likely due to its effects on the vagus nerve.

4) Kindness makes for better relationships.

This is one of the most obvious points. We all know that we like people who show us kindness. This is because kindness reduces the emotional distance between two people, so we feel more "bonded." It's something that is so strong in us that it's actually a genetic thing. We are wired for kindness.

Our evolutionary ancestors had to learn to cooperate with one another. The stronger the emotional bonds within groups, the greater the chances of survival, so "kindness genes" were etched into the human genome.

Today, when we are kind to each other, we feel a connection, and new relationships are forged, or existing ones strengthened.

5) Kindness is contagious.

When we're kind, we inspire others to be kind, and it actually creates a ripple effect that spreads outwards to our friends' friends' friends -- to three degrees of separation. Just as a pebble creates waves when it is dropped in a pond, so acts of kindness ripple outwards, touching others' lives and inspiring kindness everywhere the wave goes.

A recent scientific study reported that an anonymous 28-year-old person walked into a clinic and donated a kidney. It set off a "pay it forward" type ripple effect where the spouses or other family members of recipients of a kidney donated one of theirs to someone else in need. The "domino effect," as it was called in the *New England Journal of Medicine* report, spanned the length and breadth of the United States of America, where 10 people received a new kidney as a consequence of that anonymous donor.

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