

The Kindness Cure: Helping Ourselves by Helping Others



“Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them, humanity cannot survive,” says the Dalai Lama, who celebrates his 89th birthday this month. Kindness is critical to our existence, and altruism—the authentic inclination to help or inspire others—offers health benefits for both the giver and receiver. According to [Waguih William IsHak](#), a professor of psychiatry at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, in Los Angeles, repeated acts of consideration for others [boost oxytocin](#) (the love hormone), dopamine (the feel-good chemical), and substance P (a key neurotransmitter in pain reduction).

Benevolence not only makes us feel good, but also provides health rewards. Research published in [Psychoneuroendocrinology](#) in 2017 shows a correlation between generosity and favorable changes in immune-cell gene expression, most notably helpful in the presence of cancer and cardiovascular disease.

Being kind to others can even improve our own mental health. A 2021 study published in [Frontiers in Psychology](#) found that participants with low-to-moderate levels of mental well-being experienced mental health improvements after performing in acts of kindness for others. A 2022 study in [The Journal of Positive Psychology](#) concluded that acts of kindness were more effective in reducing anxiety and depressive disorders than cognitive behavioral therapy.

Everyday Philanthropy

Applying genuine thoughtfulness in our daily lives ripples outward. “Unlike random acts of kindness, intentional kindness is not always easy or convenient, but it’s always impactful,” says [Tracey Gates](#), a kindness ambassador, author and wellness coach in Pennington, New Jersey. “It’s inviting the new student to sit at your table or being late for your appointment because a friend was in need.”

To make meaningful connections, Gates recommends employing conscious compassion, which has been pivotal in her own journey through a stressful work environment, caring for her mother and negative news when her health buckled under an autoimmune disease. “I needed to do something to tip the scales back toward positivity in my life, so I decided to conduct an experiment,” explains Gates. “If daily stress could impact me physically and emotionally, what would happen if I put a daily dose of kindness on my to-do list?”

Inspired by her late father, who always requested “a few kind words” instead of tangible gifts, she challenged herself to craft an unexpected, handwritten letter of appreciation to a different person every day for one year. The results were transformational in her own life and health and led to her book, *The Power of a Few Kind Words: Create a More Meaningful Life, One Letter at a Time*. “What I learned is that we are much more alike than we are different. We all just want to know we matter.”

Reaching out to others “can be as simple as sharing your time with no agenda, being curious, asking questions or offering to walk someone’s dog,” attests [Jennifer Schmeisser](#), a health and wellness coach in Dublin, Ohio. “Kindness is much more than being polite. The world throws so much at you, and approaching it from an intentional place of kindness versus overwhelm is a game-changer.”

As a dedicated mother of an autistic son, Schmeisser has experienced unkind responses from strangers through the years, something she has taken as an opportunity to teach others sensitivity simply by being a positive example and not lashing out. “The intrinsic value of kindness is a larger picture of humanity outside oneself, regardless of gender, age, religion or ethnicity.”

For Gates, a more compassionate society begins at home. “If you want kindness, empathy and compassion to be core values in your child’s life, then it needs to be

a core value in your life,” she says. “As a family, share each night around the dinner table how you were kind today and how and if someone was kind to you.”

Compassion for Ourselves

Talk of “self-care” is common these days, but to achieve well-being, we must put it into practice. “For me, self-kindness is letting go, not taking all the responsibilities on my shoulders and letting myself be human. Kindness is forgiving my flaws and allowing space for the hard emotions, too,” says Schmeisser.

For Gates, being kind to ourselves makes it easier to be kind to everyone else. It also involves unplugging from screens and reconnecting to others in real time. “Get out of your chair and put your phone down,” she affirms. “Ask a colleague how their vacation was or how life with a new puppy is going. Kindness and benevolence are readily available medicines to ease the burden of our technological age.”

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