

## **PART 1**

# **Being Kind to Others**

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## Being Kind



I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

Maya Angelou

**Y**ou have the power to make the world a nicer place!

Being kind – being aware of, and doing something nice to benefit, someone else – can make both you and the person you are helping feel good.

Of course, holding a door open for someone or waiting your turn in a queue is being nice. In fact, just like saying please and thank you when you request or receive something, or saying ‘excuse me’ to get attention, holding the door open or waiting your turn in a queue is just plain good manners. So is asking people about their lives and interests, not just talking about your own.

As small children, we're taught good manners – we're told to say please and thank you, not to interrupt

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someone when they're talking, to share our things and to apologise if we do something wrong. We're constantly reminded to be polite and courteous.

What makes for good manners varies from culture to culture – in many societies it's the custom to remove your shoes before entering someone else's home. In some cultures it's considered rude or offensive to extend your left hand, rather than your right, in greeting. And if you're invited into someone's home, it's impolite to come without a gift. But wherever in the world you are, good manners are simply showing basic social skills and consideration.

So how is kindness any different? Kindness happens when you make a situation easier or less difficult for someone. Kindness involves selfless acts that either assist or lift the spirits of someone else. Kindness, like good manners and consideration, comes from a position of goodwill – wanting to do good, to do the right, proper, honourable thing. But acts of kindness are often less automatic and less formal than good manners. Kindness *can* be planned and thought out in advance, but often kind acts are spontaneous.

There need be no reason to be kind other than to make someone else smile, or be happier, but acts of kindness can also enable others to feel respected and included; to feel that they are connected to others, that they belong and are appreciated.

Whoever we are, whatever our position in life, the one concern we all have in common is how we behave

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towards others. We can relate to others from, for example, positions of indifference, greed, jealousy or hatred. Or we can relate to others with kindness, consideration and compassion.

### **What gets in the way of being kind?**

Are you aware of how you relate to others throughout the day? Is it with kindness? Every day, there's potential for kindness in pretty much every encounter and interaction with other people. Often, though, we hurry through our day so focused on what we've got to do that the opportunities to interact kindly with others – with an assistant in the shop or cafe, the receptionist at the front office, an irritating family member or troubled colleague – are often forgotten or even deliberately ignored. We're just too self-involved.

Of course, you probably don't find it easy to be kind when you're wound up, tired or stressed. It's not just you though. *We all* find it difficult to think in kind, helpful ways when we feel stressed and overwhelmed. In all of us, the part of the brain (the amygdala) that's triggered when strong emotions arise – when we feel wronged in some way or when we feel stressed and agitated – is different from the part of the brain (the neo-cortex) that operates in rational and reasonable ways and enables us to remain calm, thoughtful and considerate.

When we feel emotions such as anger or guilt, when we're stressed or upset, it's not easy to be kind and

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considerate because the amygdala has taken over. Our ability to think in a clear, calm, rational way has been switched off.

When this happens, it's not easy to notice that someone might be in need of kindness. It's not easy, but it's not impossible. In fact, on occasions like these – when you're angry, stressed or upset – forcing yourself to do a small act of kindness can actually be the catalyst that precipitates a change in how you're feeling.

But it's not just being stressed or too busy that gets in the way of being kind. There are other reasons. Perhaps you hesitated to reach out with an act of kindness because you didn't think it would make much of a difference to the other person.

Or perhaps you weren't sure how the other person would take it; you were worried you'd say or do the wrong thing. You knew they'd had some bad news but you didn't want to say the wrong thing. You didn't want to upset them further, so you said nothing. Maybe you had an opportunity to be kind, but you thought the other person might think you were being patronising – you didn't want to risk offending them. Maybe, for example, there was an occasion when your offer to help someone carry something resulted in the other person snapping, 'I can do it myself. I don't need your help thank you very much.' So the next time you saw someone struggling to carry something, you looked the other way.

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Perhaps, though, you just don't want to get too involved. If, for example, you were to offer a colleague a lift home from work one day, that might set a precedent; the other person might expect you to do it regularly. How will you get out of that? Wouldn't it be better just not to offer in the first place?

Yes, there are often difficulties and challenges to being kind, but you can take a positive approach; believe and expect that you *can* often do something kind, that you can make a difference, you can see the best in others and give others the benefit of the doubt. Even if you think a kind act won't matter or make that much difference, even if others reject your kindness, *you* know you did the right thing.

Kindness often requires courage. And courage is a strength. You can be kind *and* strong. Kindness has power and potency.

But maybe you think that by being kind you'll be susceptible to being hurt or taken advantage of. Isn't kindness all give and no take? Sure, in many situations, you take the risk of being had; there will always be someone who will try and take advantage of your kindness and generosity. But being kind is not being a doormat, it's not people pleasing. It doesn't mean *always* helping out either. It means doing what you can, when you can. It's not about duty or obligation. (That's a whole other issue!)

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Kindness isn't about being responsible for other people's happiness. Kindness is about recognising that you can make a contribution – play a part – but not have to be completely responsible.

### Limits of kindness

Having limits to your kindness protects you from being overly caught up in other people's feelings and situations. Limits help you to avoid constantly dropping what you're doing or what you need in order to accommodate someone else's wants and needs. Establishing and maintaining limits is not about turning your kindness off – you can still understand and identify with someone else's situation and associated feelings – you just don't have to feel obliged and totally responsible, that you *have* to do something kind to help.

There's a difference between being kind and being a people pleaser. People pleasers look for approval and validation from others; they involve themselves in other people's situations to improve their own self-worth. People pleasers are submissive and enable others to take advantage of their eagerness to please.

There's also a difference between being kind and being a rescuer: taking over and saving others from their situation. Rescuers just *have* to step in; they need to be needed. Rescuers turn other people into victims.

Kindness is not about constantly putting other people's needs before yours. It's simply about considering and

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connecting with others; being aware of when you could make a situation easier or less difficult for someone, make them smile and lift their spirits, help them feel that they belong and are appreciated.

### **Benefits of kindness**

There's no doubt, though, that doing something for someone else does make you feel good. Make someone smile and you'll feel better for having done so.

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 immediately to experience an increase in happiness scores, with benefits lasting for a month after.

Being kind takes you out of yourself; it opens you up to others and broadens your perspective. In order to be kind, you have to make an effort and be aware of what's happening around you; to be aware of what's happening for other people.

Kind gestures free you from focusing on yourself and enable you to reach out to someone else.

As the author Daniel Goleman says in his book *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*,

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‘When we focus on ourselves, our world contracts as our problems and preoccupations loom large. But when we focus on others, our world expands. Our own problems drift to the periphery of the mind and so seem smaller, and we increase our capacity for connection – or compassionate action.’

Kindness is attractive; it makes people want to be around you. They appreciate what you’ve done, so they want to spend more time with you.

Kindness helps people feel respected, valued and worthy. It helps them to feel connected to others; that they belong. When you’re kind to people, it makes them happy. The more people who experience kindness from you, the more happy people you’ll have in your life. When those around you are happier, your world becomes a brighter, better place to live.

Kindness can be persuasive and influential; it can turn a negative situation into a positive one. Even if the other person is not nice, you can be. If you can show a kindness to someone even though they’re being rude or unreasonable, it can make you both feel better.

Kindness is contagious. When you’re kind to others, the impact of your action doesn’t necessarily stop there. Often, the recipient of your kindness, and others who see or hear about it, are inspired to do something kind themselves. Kindness elevates all who come into contact with it. When we’re elevated, our spirits are lifted. As Thomas Jefferson noted, ‘When any original act of charity or of

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gratitude, for instance, is presented either to our sight or imagination, we are deeply impressed with its beauty and feel a strong desire in ourselves of doing charitable and grateful acts also.'

Kindness is calm and peaceful. Remember a time when you were kind to someone else and think about how you felt. Was it peace and calm; a state of mutual harmony between you and the person you were kind to?

And finally, being kind to others encourages you to be kind to yourself! To see yourself as a person of worth; doing the best you can with what you have.

### **Aspects of kindness**

So how do we become kinder? It helps to think of kindness as having several attributes and qualities that are both innate and can be developed.

Those attributes include:

**Empathy:** a willingness to understand other people's circumstances and feelings.

**Respect:** knowing that both you and other people have value and worth.

**Mindfulness:** being aware of what's happening around you and for other people, right here, right now.

**Acceptance:** recognising that what's already happened can't be changed (but what happens next can be!).

**Patience:** accepting that things happen in their own time.

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**Generosity:** going out of your way: giving more than might be expected.

**Positive thinking:** seeing the best in other people and in yourself.

**Courage:** reaching out despite any apprehension you might feel.

These aspects and qualities of kindness all make the world a better place; both other people's worlds and your world too!

### In a nutshell

- We can relate to others from positions of indifference, greed, jealousy or hatred. Or we can relate to others with kindness, consideration and compassion.
- Kindness comes from a position of goodwill. It's when you make a situation easier for someone, assist or lift their spirits.
- When you're stressed and overwhelmed, when you think it won't make much of a difference to the other person, it's not easy to be kind. When you feel you might say or do the wrong thing, or you just don't want to get too involved or have your kindness taken advantage of, it's not easy to be kind. It's not easy, but it's not impossible.
- There are limits, though. Establishing and maintaining limits is not about turning your kindness off – it's knowing that you don't have to feel obliged and totally responsible; that you don't *have* to do something kind to help.

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- There are so many good reasons to be kind. Being kind takes you out of yourself; it opens you up to others and broadens your perspective; it allows you to be aware of what's happening around you, and to be aware of what's happening for other people.
- Kindness helps people feel respected, valued and worthy. It helps them to feel connected to others; to feel that they're included, they belong and are appreciated. It makes them happy.
- Kindness can turn a negative situation into a positive one. If you can show a kindness to someone even though they're being unreasonable, it can make you both feel better.
- Kindness is contagious. Experiencing, seeing or hearing about acts of kindness inspires others to do something kind themselves. Kindness elevates all who come into contact with it. Kindness is attractive; it makes people want to be around you.
- Being kind to others encourages you to be kind to yourself!
- Kindness is comprised of a number of qualities that are both innate and can be developed.

