

ABOVE ALL, be kind



In the fast-paced world we live in, it can often be difficult to connect with compassion. Elizabeth Sulis Kim finds out how we can be kinder to ourselves and others.

When people are kind, it can make us feel good. Sometimes it can be a small gesture, such as an exchanged smile between strangers, or something bigger like doing a favour for a neighbour. Knowing we've lightened someone's burden lightens our own burden too. Kindness is reciprocal. If we are kind, we improve other people's lives, and we, in return, reap the benefits.

According to clinical psychologist Joe Oliver, being kind to other people is beneficial to our own wellbeing, mental health and relationships. "As these flourish, other benefits for creativity and broader physical and mental health manifest," he says.

It sounds simple, but it can also be one of the hardest things. Despite our best intentions, a study led by Jonathan Freeman, psychology professor at Goldsmiths, suggests we're not always as kind as we think we are. In this current age of political divisiveness, and with the anonymity that comes from being behind a computer screen, it's becoming more difficult to extend empathy to other people. Sometimes it's hard enough to make time for ourselves, but being kinder might be the easiest form of self-care – and we're not the only ones who benefit. However, the challenge can be identifying in which areas we could be kinder.

It can mean looking after ourselves more, so we have the capacity to think beyond our own needs. Unkindness is often unintentional – most of us occasionally experience lapses in empathy,

when we're tired, stressed, or too overwhelmed to take on another perspective. "Being caught up in our own lives is a key issue," says Dr Oliver. "The busy, fast pace of modern society also means we less regularly stop to make genuine connections with people. In this kind of society, it is much easier to disregard other people's needs and put our own first."

People who have experienced trauma, abuse or limited parenting in their life may also unintentionally struggle to empathise with others. Awareness is key here. If we become conscious of those times we're not always as kind as we could be,

we can learn to become kinder. "Unkindness that is intentional," explains Dr Oliver, "can be a method for managing low self-esteem. The logic says 'if you feel bad, I feel better'. It can also be a calculated effort to achieve a goal, or a prioritisation of needs."

But intentional unkindness is a vicious cycle. While it may temporarily boost self-esteem and bring short-term gains, the long-term losses are far greater. The long-term fix is kindness, a virtue integral for fostering the social connections that make us happy.

We can probably all remember at least one occasion when someone said something that didn't make us feel good about ourselves. Perhaps the intent wasn't there – it could be the flippant comment a stranger made in a crowd, when they ▶

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were hurriedly trying to get from A to B and saw you as an obstacle, or the snappy answer from someone close to us when we ask questions and they are tired. The reverse situation is easy to imagine – when we're stressed we sometimes feel more impatient when others slow us down. We don't like feeling overwhelmed. It's hard in the heat of the moment, but if we can try to imagine how we'd feel in the other person's shoes, we usually realise they deserve kinder treatment. What we put out into the world usually reflects how we're feeling.

There are a few things we can do to try and stay connected with our empathy, even in those stressful moments. When we read novels, for instance, we are trying on another person's shoes, reminding ourselves that other people, like ourselves, also view themselves as the heroes of their own stories.

Volunteering to help others is another great way to stay connected with our empathy. An NCVO survey found that volunteers report feeling more socially connected and less lonely. Donating our time to helping others helps us think outside ourselves and not to always prioritise our needs over other people's.

Eating well, sleeping well and reducing overall stress levels can all help with our capacity for kindness, too. 'Hangry' is a real thing, according to researchers at the University of Guelph, who found that having low blood sugar can put you in a bad mood and bring out negative emotions, such as anger, stress or disgust. Stress is often situational – resolving personal or work-related stresses can help, as can finding healthy coping mechanisms. Stress-busting also contributes to sleeping better. Better sleep, in turn, puts people in a better mood according to a study by the University of Pennsylvania.

Mindfulness doesn't end with self-care. To truly live in the present and feel good about it, we need to feel like we're connecting with others and lessening their burden. We all know how good kindness makes us feel, how it can boost our sense of self-esteem and self-worth. It makes us more confident, can turn a bad day into a good day, and improves our relationships. If we can imagine for a moment what it's like to be in another's shoes, perhaps we'll stay connected with our empathy. Kindness is a virtuous cycle. When we are kind, we improve our little corner of the world, and that kindness comes back to us.



HOW TO BE Kind

Sometimes it feels like life ought to come with an instruction manual. Clinical psychologist Joe Oliver offers some advice.

1 WHEN YOU STRONGLY DISAGREE
It's important not to rush in and criticise. Instead, ask: "Is this issue important to me? How will I feel if I let this go? Is there anything to be gained by arguing? Does viewing the argument from their perspective help me at all?" If the answer is yes, and you want to respond, then remembering that the other person may feel strongly too, will help you be kind and respectful as you disagree with them.

2 WHEN SOMEONE CALLS YOU OUT
Consider if what has been said is valid. It may be a useful perspective or they may see something about what you've said or done that you haven't thought about. You could consider apologising and look for ways to make amends. If you feel that you haven't done anything wrong it can be useful to acknowledge the feedback and calmly state your case and why you disagree. For example, "Thanks for your feedback. I have a different point of view, but I'd be happy to talk it through with you".

3 WHEN YOU NEED TO APOLOGISE
Most people find apologising hard to do – it makes us vulnerable and opens us up for further criticism. However, an apology is a way to signal that the relationship is important to you. It's also a way to help you learn from the experience and build in more helpful behaviours in future. A good apology should include: a statement of regret for harm or inconvenience caused; an acceptance for responsibility for your actions (without an attempt to minimise); and a statement of willingness to make reparation. For example, "I'm really sorry that I've hurt you. I feel terrible for what I've done. I'll make sure I don't do that again in the future and I'd like to find a way to make it up to you".

4 IF SOMEONE MAKES IT PERSONAL
Usually when someone says something personal, it means they're feeling threatened. It's almost never worth stooping to their level and

making personal comments in response. You'll only regret it. Pausing, taking a deep breath and reiterating your point is usually the most helpful action to take. It may also be time to end the conversation and move on.

5 WHEN A STRANGER IS UNKIND
In nearly all situations when a person is unkind, it reflects on their own state of mind or emotional state. It's important not to take their behaviour personally. Of course, there's no right way to respond when someone is unkind. Some people are comfortable with letting things go. Others will want to say something to draw the person's attention to their behaviour. But remembering to be mindful in those moments and responding on the basis of the type of person you want to be, is likely to help you respond most effectively.

6 WHEN SOMEONE IS BEING PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE OR CONDESCENDING
A calm and assertive response is often most helpful. This means you can choose your responses thoughtfully, rather than being pushed into responding in a way that is not your choosing.

7 WHEN YOU FEEL OVERWHELMED
It's important to draw the person's attention to their behaviour and let them know the impact they are having. It's possible they may not be aware of what they are doing or how it is affecting you. Saying something like, "Can I interrupt for a moment? I need you to slow down or pause". Using non-verbal gestures, such as a raised hand can be a useful way to slow someone down. If the person struggles to respond to your interventions, then simply repeat your request again.

