

# the power of kindness...



With the festive period creeping closer, the spirit of generosity and good-will is a hot topic. **David R Hamilton**, shows us how kindness benefits not only the receiver, but also the giver... sending ripples throughout the world.

**H**is Holiness Dalai Lama said, "This is my simple religion. There is no need for temples; no need for complicated philosophy. Our own brain, our own heart is our temple; the philosophy is kindness."

It is one of my favourite quotes because it is so simple, yet it speaks volumes of truth.

Kindness creates happiness and spreads it around. It makes people smile, it makes us feel closer to others, and it even brings hope. It might be an overused cliché, but kindness really can make the world a better place.

It also has some interesting side-effects because even though we show kindness to help someone, it also benefits the person who is being kind. We feel an inner warmth when we're kind, like we know in our hearts that it is the right thing to do. For many, in the instance of an act of kindness, much of their worries momentarily fade away and all that's left is an inner sense of purpose, telling us that being kind is all that actually matters.

The feel-good factor that it gives us when we're being kind even has a name. It's called, 'Helper's High', first coined by Allan Luks in his book, 'The Healing Power of Doing Good'. And the more we do, to a point, the better we feel. A number of recent studies have now even suggested that helping others is actually a natural antidote to depression.

## chemical reaction

On a chemical level it is believed that the brain's natural versions of morphine and heroin, known as endogenous opioids, flood to the front of the brain when we do a kind act. This is part of the neurology of kindness.

When I was growing up, one of the pieces of folk wisdom I heard was that if you live from the heart, it's good for

your heart. It stuck in my mind because we associate kindness and compassion with the heart. I am thrilled that scientific research is now confirming that it is actually, literally, true.

Kindness usually makes the person doing the kindness, and the beneficiary, feel some sort of bond, even if it is only for a few moments. Although it usually lasts much longer because we run the event over and over in our minds. But research shows that we produce the hormone, oxytocin, when we feel a bond with another person. And powerful research shows that oxytocin literally cleans up the cardiovascular system.

It reduces blood pressure as well as reducing levels of the two main culprits in cardiovascular disease – free radicals and inflammation. It is known as a cardioprotective hormone and thus kindness can be said to be cardioprotective. So if you live from the heart, it really is good for your heart.

And compassion is also good for your heart. Strong scientific evidence suggests that compassion stimulates the vagus nerve, which counters the fight or flight response. Instead it initiates a body-wide 'rest and relax' response, which is especially beneficial for the heart and blood vessels.

## road rage

I think just about everyone has had a near miss whilst driving and experienced the wrath of another driver. I've come across this recently and the reaction I received was mostly typical. The driver sounded his horn and flashed his lights. When the car passed me, the driver made a point of looking across and aggressively raising his hands as if to say, "You idiot. What do you think you're doing?" or something more colourful to that effect. Now, while that might have helped him to get some aggression out of

his system, such behaviour wasn't very kind and isn't very healthy in the long-term. It's not doing his heart any good.

It is healthier, albeit more difficult to do, when someone causes a near miss, to just put a hand up or make a kind gesture of understanding. It's compassion we need at these times, not anger and judgement. As Philo of Alexandria wrote, 'Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.'

## road redemption

I know a woman named Maureen who was driving her car towards the Forth Road Bridge, near Edinburgh, in Scotland when she accidentally cut in front of another driver. He flashed his lights, beeped his horn aggressively, and angrily mouthed some expletives in her direction as he passed.

Maureen was upset and shaken. But she composed herself and drove on towards the bridge. Somehow, when she reached the toll booth a mile or so further on, she had got there ahead of him and he was now in the car right behind her. Do you know what she did? She paid his toll for him.

About a half mile down the road, he pulled alongside her. She looked across, only to see him with a greatly softened face and a smile, as he mouthed the words, 'thank you!'

Her kindness to him, instead of justifiable anger of 'how dare he...etc', that we often feel after someone has been mean to us, diffused his anger. It was like a pulse of energy that knocked out his anger circuits. And the effects of kindness are farther reaching.

## ripple effect

I have a little saying that, 'Wherever you go you take yourself with you.' In other words, if something is, say, angering you, there's a good chance that other people you meet will be on the receiving end of an outpouring of that anger.

Maureen's kindness prevented that outpouring at a later stage, and so protected people farther down the line. Kindness (and anger) have ripple effects. It's like dropping a pebble in a pond and a leaf on the other side will lift when the wave reaches it. Similarly, people not even known to us are lifted in some ways by our kindness.

We live in an interconnected world. Social networks fuse us together so that anyone can reach just about anyone else in no greater than 6 social steps (that's a scientifically proven fact). What I find inspiring is that a Harvard study recently showed that kindness typically spreads out to 3 social steps. In other words, an act of kindness will impact the person you show the kindness to, their family and friends, and each of their family and friends.

In other words, a lot of souls are nourished from one single kind act. An act of kindness is never wasted and does not just stop with the smile on a person's face. It ripples on.

I think that's as good a reason as any for being kind. Know that, in some way, you are not only helping the person in front of you, but that you are helping to make the whole world a better place.

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