

Kindness: The Healthy Benefits on our Mental Health

Michalis N Khalil*

Clinical Psychologist, Republic of Cyprus

***Corresponding Author:** Michalis N Khalil, Clinical Psychologist, Republic of Cyprus.

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Today I would like to say something about an issue that concerns me deeply. It is the concept of kindness and how - and especially when - it shows up on people. But before I go talking about kindness, let's first define what kindness is exactly.

Kindness is described as the value of being friendly, considerate, and generous [1] - characteristics that describe our interaction with others. Based on Merriam-Webster dictionary, kindness means, benevolence, favor, mercy, service, courtesy, and grace. An important descriptor of kindness, according to the dictionary, is affection, which essentially is a feeling of liking and caring for someone or something; a tender attachment. Interesting, wouldn't you say?

Now time for the big question: How often are you kind and gentle to anyone in your everyday life? Think. Also, did your kind gesture involve any kind of cooperation?

Certain studies explain that cooperation emerges as a combination of innate and learned behavior [2]. In other words, when we are kind, we act based on our natural tendencies and are in harmony with our human nature. The only difference in various cultures is how this natural tendency is shaped and encouraged by significant others.

Certain qualities play an important role to the presence of cooperation. For example, tolerance determined whether the individuals would cooperate, especially in places where access to services was evenly divided [3,4]. In other words, if everyone gets a same amount and quality of service, then everyone is happy. However, this sense of collaboration changes if dominant personalities are in the room [3]. Dominant people disturb the dynamics of a group. For instance, think about a time you sat down with your mates to have a drink, share a platter of tacos and cheese, and a person arrives to join you - who happened to be a friend of a friend. And there you have it! Sooner or later, this person starts monopolizing the conversation - and most possibly invade the platter - creating an unfitting negative mood in the atmosphere.

This is especially true in romantic relationships. Rather than spouses trying to dominate each other, showing kindness works like a "glue" to bring them close. Based on research, kindness and emotional stability in a relationship is the most important predictor of satisfaction and stability; it makes the couple feeling cared for, understood and loved [5]. In other words, the more kindness a partner gives, the more they receive in the long term which eventually leads to being kinder to themselves [6].

Besides having the quality of being kind through cooperation, kindness has positive effects on our brain. Dr David Hamilton in his article "Why Kindness is Good for You" stated that just by thinking something, affects us at the genetic level. He further notes that when we perform any act of kindness and good will, especially when interpersonal interaction with people is involved, the hormone oxytocin is generated. As he described it, this hormone could also be called a "molecule of kindness" and the "cuddle chemical" [7]. Research on oxytocin is beginning to show that we are genetically wired to show kindness, commit selfless acts, cooperate, be more generous, and trust the others [7]. This hormone also aids in lowering blood pressure and improving the rate of our heart [8] as well as helps improving self-perception and positive social behavior [9].

Other important facts about kindness are that it increases our energy, increases the levels of happiness, leads us live a longer life, increases the reward networks in our brain, and stimulates the production of serotonin [8]. At the same time, it decreases pain due to the reproduction of endorphins, reduces anxiety by producing less cortisol - the stress hormone, age slower than the average population, and last but not least it fights off depression [8].

There has even been some research linking contemplative accounts of compassion and loving-kindness practices with research from social cognitive neuroscience and social psychology. Specifically, there was an assumption that kindness-based meditation could enhance the neural systems that are related to faster perceptual processes, understanding of another's affective body state, slower and higher-level perspective-taking, and emotional regulation [10].

There are many ways to practice kindness. One way is to keep an eye for opportunities that challenge your kindness, such in situations where there are people in need. Become aware when people need a hand about something. Ask twice - just to be sure [11]! A sense of community is created wherever there is kindness [1].

Start off your day by being kind firstly to yourself, and then to others. Don't forget to start off with a smile; it's there where it all begins. A kind word, holding the door to someone, help a stranger carry a heavy load, an honest compliment, sharing homemade food, refusing to gossip, becoming mindful and considerate of one's joy, and giving honest and true affection are all forms of kindness. Appreciate kindness in your life, and sooner or later you will feel grateful, pleased, and a better person!

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