

IT'S COOL TO BE KIND

ACTS OF KINDNESS ARE EVERYWHERE, FROM SHARING
A MOMENT TO HELP THOSE IN NEED, TO PAYING FOR A
STRANGER'S COFFEE. TRY IT YOURSELF - IT FEELS AMAZING

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They say no act of kindness, however small, is wasted, and judging by the flurry of stories in the media recently, we're starting to realise the immense impact a little kindness can have. Our hearts went out to the couple who cancelled their wedding to give the money to Syrian refugees, and the woman who donated a kidney to a save the life of a stranger. But smaller gestures also went viral, like the barber who lay down on the floor so that an autistic child could have a stress-free haircut, and the elderly gentleman helping a young man do his tie properly on the New York subway.

There was a time when being called a 'do-gooder' was an insult. But now it's definitely cool to be kind, says entrepreneur David Jamilly, founder of Kindness UK. "Every decade has a flavour. The 1960s and 1970s were all about personal development. The 1980s and 1990s were about individualism. Now, there's a movement to towards values-based living, and what we can do to help other people." However, this is not simply about 'being nice', says David. "Kindness has been called 'love with its working boots on'. It was thought of as just warm and fuzzy. But kindness can be a powerful force for good."

RANDOM ACTS

The Random Acts of Kindness movement began around 40 years ago in the US. It's rumoured that the writer Anne Herbert wrote the words 'practise random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty' on a placemat in a restaurant in California, and the phrase 'random acts of kindness' started to appear on bumper stickers. Soon, groups of people were carrying out spontaneous and often anonymous good deeds, such as paying for the person behind them in the coffee shop queue, giving a warm coat to a homeless person, or leaving a kind note on a

stranger's car windscreen. The movement has grown, and now thousands of people take part in International Random Acts of Kindness week every year (14-20 February; randomactsofkindness.org).

The appeal of being kind has been recognised – see TV ad campaigns such as the little girl who wants to help the lonely old man in the John Lewis Christmas ad or the jogger who uses Apple pay to send a coffee over to the student in the corner of a café. "I have been working in social impact since the early 2000s and it always bothered me how 'socks and sandals' it was," says Daianna Karaian, founder of thisisthoughtful.com, a collective dedicated to guerilla generosity. "I was passionate about making a positive impact but I also believe that people are more likely to do good if they get pleasure out of it, rather than doing it out of guilt." In one campaign called 'a penny for your thoughts', origami envelopes were scattered all over London, containing a penny and the words, "Here's a penny. Pennies are, as you know, lucky. We hope this one brings you the luck you need today. If you're already feeling lucky, why not pass the luck on? If you're feeling really generous, stuff in some extra luck."

Part of the attraction of the kindness movement is that there's no political or religious agenda attached,



Act of kindness #1

An Australian woman who was kept in hospital for nine days with her newborn came out to find a parking ticket on her car. Then she noticed a note attached which said: "Hi there. I saw your car had a parking ticket on it. I'm sure whatever you are going through at hospital is tough enough, so I have paid for you. Hope things get better!"

Good Gifts



At birthdays and Christmases, invite everyone to wrap an extra gift to take to a children's hospital, old folks' home or a food bank. Bask in the warm glow of having made a stranger's day

Act of kindness #2

When BBC Radio Sheffield ran a news piece about Winnie Blagden, who was facing her 100th birthday alone, more than 16,000 people sent birthday cards to her nursing home.

says David. "We've lost faith in politicians and seen violence committed in the name of religion. We're more interested in finding our own values rather than conforming to those imposed on us. We carried out a survey where nearly a thousand people sent us their definition of kindness. Every single one was different. There's nothing directional about kindness and there's no agenda."

Small acts of kindness carried out by individuals are just as important as grander gestures, as they create a ripple effect, says psychologist Dr Emma Seppala, Science Director of Stanford University's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education and author of *The Happiness Track: How to Apply the Science of Happiness to Accelerate your Success* (Piatkus). "Compassionate behaviour spreads, multiplying its benefits," she says. "Research shows that when people help you, you'll in turn be more likely to help others." One lady sparked a huge Pay it Forward chain at her local drive-through McDonald's in Florida in December. When she paid for the customer behind her and asked the cashier to wish the customer a Merry Christmas, it started a chain of generosity that saw 250 people all paying for the meals for car/s behind them.

IT'S GOOD FOR YOU, TOO

It's no coincidence that kindness has gripped our imaginations at the same time as we're spending more »

HOW TO CULTIVATE KINDNESS

Kindness should come from the heart, not a to-do list. It isn't about ticking off a list of 'kind' tasks every day. It's about cultivating a compassionate outlook on life, one that is authentic to your personality and lifestyle. Here are some ideas:

- Practise **conscious commuting** - instead of tuning out, look for ways to help others, like offering a seat to someone. If you drive, be the one who lets people out at junctions.
- If you work in an office, bring in **kindness Fridays**. In one study, people who designate a day a week to it experienced a bigger happiness hit than those who spread their good deeds throughout the week.

- Turn walking the dog into an **awe walk** - walking somewhere so beautiful it inspires feelings of awe increases feelings of generosity and reduces feelings of entitlement, according to one study.

- **Encourage children** to be kind. Bernadette Russell has written two innovative books with fun ideas for kids on how to spread a little kindness. *Do Nice. Be Kind. Spread Happy* and *Be The Change, Make it Happen: Big and Small Ways Kids can Make a Difference* (Ivy Press).

When you finish a good book, leave it in a café or on a bus, with a note telling the person who finds it that it's a gift to them and to pass it on after they've read it. Think of all your little books setting off on their own journeys





Next time you're standing under an umbrella and see someone else getting soaked, offer to share. While you're huddled in close proximity you might even make a new friend, too

time on screens than ever before, because being on the receiving end of an act of kindness gives you a feeling of human connection. "Social connection is at the root of wellbeing. It's one of our most innate drives. Those human moments of kindness in our day-to-day life are what gives life meaning," says Emma. Yet kindness is innate – studies show that children as young as two will help an adult who is trying to open a cupboard with their hands full, or pick up something they've dropped, without being asked. "We are genetically wired to be kind," says wellbeing researcher Dr David Hamilton, author of *Why Kindness is Good for You* (Hayhouse). "Happy chemicals like serotonin and dopamine are released in the brain when we do a good deed for another person. Acting in an unkind way creates a stress response and lowers our wellbeing."

There's another chemical involved – oxytocin, known as the 'bonding hormone', a neuropeptide released from the pituitary gland that makes us feel connected to others. "When you perform an act of kindness, especially where it involves face-to-face contact with the person involved, the momentary connection generates oxytocin in both you and them," says David. New research shows that oxytocin may be cardio-protective and good for gut health, too.

Kindness also has long-term benefits for mental wellbeing. Kind people have more resilience to the negative effects of stress, and being kind on a regular basis boosts your self-esteem, according to Japanese researchers. In another study, a group of people told to carry out one act of kindness a day for just 10 days scored significantly higher on a 'satisfaction with life' assessment than the control group. "Doing something kind for someone else is a powerful antidote to depression," says Jamilly, "because it takes your focus away from yourself. In years

to come we could be given a prescription to 'do a kind act'."

BEING CONSCIOUS

But given that it's a natural instinct, and makes us feel good, why is it so easy to get out of the kindness habit? According to Emma, the biggest culprit is stress. "Stress affects your ability to be kind as it narrows your focus of attention and makes you disconnect from others," she says. According to research, stress restricts our ability to feel empathy, and the less empathic you are, the less motivated you feel to do good. "Embarrassment can also impinge on kindness - research shows people want to help but often hold back because they worry that people will think they have an ulterior motive," says Emma.

One of Jamilly's aims is to simply move kindness further up our consciousness because, "if we're aware of the concept, we're more likely to act on it". Kindness UK has sent out 30,000 kindness packs to UK primary and secondary schools with guidance on how to introduce kindness into the current

Act of kindness #3

A Florida couple chose not to have a wedding list when they got married, and asked guests to carry out an act of kindness instead. After the wedding, they carried out their own kind act by giving their wedding flowers to patients at a local hospital.

curriculum. It is also working with the University of Sussex on how to introduce a 'culture of kindness' into big organisations. "In the not too distant future, companies will include kindness in their corporate social responsibility initiatives," says Jamilly.

In the meantime, it's up to us to make a difference by simply being kind. We may already be doing this to a degree without recognising it; apparently, four out of five people carry out an act of kindness at least once a week, such as giving directions to someone who is lost, stopping to let someone cross the road and letting someone with very little shopping go ahead in the checkout queue. And studies show that when you do something kind, the feelgood response it creates motivates you to be kind again, creating a positive feedback loop. Kindness can be as simple as smiling at the person who serves you coffee, offering your umbrella to somebody or passing on a good book. "Set yourself a challenge of looking out for chances to be kind or helpful for a week," says Emma. It may mean being brave – research shows we can feel uncomfortable helping people unless they've asked us for help. But go out of your way to be kind and I guarantee you'll feel amazing." S

Got an act of kindness you'd like to share? Tweet us @simplethingsmag. Illustrations taken from *Be The Change, Make it Happen* by Bernadette Russell (Kane Miller)