



ADAM LEVEY

LIFTING ONE ANOTHER
UP IS AS POWERFUL AS
ANY FITNESS ROUTINE
OR HEALTHY MEAL.
HERE'S WHY BEING KIND
MATTERS, MORE THAN
EVER, FOR YOUR BODY
AND OUR FUTURE.

BY SARAH DIGIULIO

DNESS
CHANGES US

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indness isn't simply a happy-face, cherry-on-top thing. Along with the cooperation and collaboration it fosters, kindness is one of the main things that's made it possible for people to live in communities for thousands of years. It is also going to be needed to address the huge challenges we're facing today, from

climate change to racial and economic injustice, says Kelli Harding, M.D., M.P.H., an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at Columbia University Irving Medical Center in New York City. In fact, she says, "it might be the critical issue facing our world right now."

Kinder communities—ones that allow for fair access to things like housing, education, and health care—help us live longer, healthier lives, says Dr. Harding, who wrote a book on the topic: *The Rabbit Effect: Live Longer, Happier, and Healthier With the Groundbreaking Science of Kindness*. The COVID-19

pandemic laid bare this paradigm: Disadvantaged communities have faced much higher tolls from the deadly virus.

On top of that, research shows that for us as individuals, our bodies work better when our lives are filled with more empathy and kindness. It doesn't make us immune to the stressors and dangers around us, Dr. Harding explains, "but kindness helps us do better mentally and physically with whatever illness or other adversity shows up."

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WHAT BEING KIND DOES FOR YOUR BODY

It makes sense that when someone acts kindly toward us, we benefit. But research suggests that practicing kindness also significantly affects our own well-being. Even accounting for differences in factors like age, gender, education, personality, and mental health, studies show that kinder behavior is linked to having fewer health problems—such as heart disease, sleep disorders, and hearing loss—and living longer.

The research is piling up: Studies have found that being kind can help lower blood pressure and anxiety. Practicing helping behaviors even lessened symptoms of depression in people who had lost a spouse. Experiments show that doing something kind for someone is more likely to boost your mood and lower your stress than doing

something for yourself. Plus, a recent sweeping review of data including nearly 200,000 study participants found that prosocial behavior (things like donating money to charity, volunteering, altruism, trust, and compassion) was linked to better physical and mental health.

What makes acts of kindness so powerful? “Each small daily choice we make either nurtures our emotional well-being or aggravates stress, and that helps or hinders our physical health,” Dr. Harding says. Practicing kindness is on the helping side of that equation.

We know kindness triggers a neurochemical response, explains Waguih IsHak, M.D., a professor of psychiatry and behavioral neurosciences at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center and editor of *The Handbook of Wellness Medicine*. Oxytocin and dopamine (two feel-good hormones)





get released, and cortisol (a hormone related to stress) falls.

There's evidence that kindness affects our genes too. The DNA we are born with is the blueprint for our cells as they replicate over the course of our lives. Diet, exercise, and smoking all affect how well that blueprint gets translated into new cells—and whether genes linked to heart disease or cancer get activated. But kindness and other social factors in our environments impact that process as well, Dr. Harding says. Studies suggest that things like feeling socially isolated, not having someone who shows affection to you, and feeling discriminated against (all examples of unkindness) hamper it.

THE KINDNESS- EMPATHY LINK

Kindness and empathy are separate entities that are closely related.

GETTY IMAGES.

CAN YOU BE TOO KIND?

Kindness without self-care creates burnout. And it's common among people in caregiving professions, like doctors and nurses, who continuously take on the emotional strain of others. But burnout doesn't happen because you use up too many empathy or kindness chips, Dr. Harding explains. Usually people burn out when they don't have time for the self-care practices that let them recharge and focus on their mental well-being. Here are five helpful things we often fail to do:

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| ■ Take breaks | ■ Spend time outside |
| ■ Nap | |
| ■ Schedule vacation days (and truly disconnect) | ■ Make time for wellness activities like meditation, exercise, or a hobby |

Kindness is doing something to help someone else without expecting anything in return. Empathy is feeling what someone else is feeling.

Being kind and feeling empathetic don't always go together, explains Jamil Zaki, Ph.D., an associate professor in the department of psychology at Stanford University, who researches the neuroscience of how people connect with and care for one another. Sometimes we act kindly out of obligation (giving money to a niece's school fundraiser) and sometimes we feel empathy and don't act on it (hearing a distressing news report but continuing one's routine). Yet empathy can be a strong motivator for kind



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BUILD YOUR KINDNESS SUPERPOWER

behavior and can make kind actions more powerful, says Zaki, also the author of *The War for Kindness*. For example, Zaki's research has shown that people tend to feel happier and less stressed after they have done something kind for a friend—and those benefits are greatest on days when they also report empathizing with a friend.

Other studies have found that when people give to a charity and think their money has had a positive impact, the emotional benefits of that spending increase. Volunteering seems to have a similar effect. In one study, people who volunteered tended to live longer than those who didn't—but not when they volunteered for "self-oriented" reasons.

When it's difficult to be kind (say, when you're facing someone with opposing political views), empathy can help. Taking a moment to recognize where another person is

Kindness is not a personality trait, Zaki says. It's a skill you have to work on continuously.

Dr. Harding adds that we all inevitably fail at being kind sometimes. But if you follow these tips often, you'll be on the right track.

■ **Pay attention to how well you play with others:**

Did you react too quickly? Did you yell because they yelled? When this happens, pause and notice it.

■ **See it their way:**

Consider the situation from the other person's point of view. What led them to do what they did or think the way they do?

■ **Rehumanize the other person:** In digital interactions, consider the person saying or typing the words.

■ **Take a pause:** Rushing makes us feel stressed, which makes it difficult to practice empathy and kindness.

■ **Make it a habit:** Schedule time to volunteer, call a lonely friend, or do someone a favor.

coming from instead of jumping to conclusions and reacting can help you connect and make it easier to be kind.

Remember, being kind doesn't mean never getting angry. Kindness is treating others with dignity and respect even when we disagree with them. It doesn't make you a pushover, Dr. Harding says: "Kindness takes serious courage."