

Practicing kindness is good for your health

By Teddi Nicolaus

Sometimes the simplest act of kindness, such as a stranger holding a door for you, a compliment from your partner or a smile from a colleague, can brighten your day. And now, thanks to science, we know that kindness is good for your long-term physical and mental health.

"From a public health perspective, kindness is an incredibly healthy thing to do," says researcher Kelli Harding, MD, MPH.

"Numerous studies show that kindness in all the different areas of our lives — from our homes to our relationships, schools, workplaces and communities, impacts our health in many positive ways."

Kindness is defined as an act of generosity that's given without expecting anything in return. Whether you are the giver or the receiver, studies show that simple acts of kindness can improve mood and self-esteem, boost the immune system, lower blood pressure and relieve anxiety by increasing levels of your body's feel-good chemicals. Studies also link kindness with fewer aches and pains. And more good news: Practicing kindness is free and readily available to everyone.

Most importantly, kindness buffers stress, says Harding, whose research on the topic led her to write "The Rabbit Effect: Live Longer, Happier and Healthier with the Groundbreaking Science of Kindness." The book's name is a nod to a 1978 study that set out to establish the relationship between high cholesterol and heart health in rabbits. One nurturing researcher — who happened to be

very kind and caring — naturally petted, cuddled and showed kindness to her set of rabbits. Surprisingly, her kindness helped protect those bunnies from heart attacks.

"There are lots of strategies to offset stress, but a simple one is acts of kindness," Harding says. "It's an immediate boost, and it's fascinating because the emotional response you actually feel in your body also has a positive health benefit."

Humans are hardwired to be kind, Harding says, noting that we constantly mirror each other's emotions. In fact, not only does kindness benefit the giver and the receiver, it also benefits people who observe somebody being kind, making them more likely to be kind as well.

If you want to get started on showing kindness, start by being kind to yourself, she says. Rest when you need to rest, check in with your emotions and take a break if you need to. And don't be too hard on yourself if there's a situation where you think you could have been kinder.

"We all have our moments," she says. "Give yourself permission to be human."

The power of kindness

Every human being has an opportunity to make a difference in other people's lives. It's really just a choice, says Harding, who offers a few simple ways to begin creating tiny positive ripples that can lead to an ocean of kindness.

1 Put your phone down and be present with your kids, partner, friends and loved ones.

"It's one of the kindest things people can do in our highly distracted world, because our brains really crave the luxury of face-to-face interaction," she says. "Offering your full attention is itself an act of kindness, and something we can all do."

2 Pause before you interact with someone. It's actually an act of kindness, because studies show we are more likely to be kind when we're not in a rush.

3 Volunteer when you can. Volunteering is a great way to show kindness, Harding says, and interestingly, studies show that volunteers live longer, probably because social interaction makes them feel less lonely and boosts health.

4 Reach out to people. Have lunch with a friend or relative, or just send a quick text to say "Hello! I've been thinking about you."

5 Offer a compliment. Kind words and compliments can make someone feel seen, valued and cared for.



>> For more kindness tips, visit www.randomactsofkindness.org

6 Ask people how their day is going. It's a simple act of kindness, Harding says. And when you do it many times over the course of your day, you're actually buffering your own stress as well.

7 Give a hug to someone you care about. In addition to being an act of kindness, studies show that people who give or get daily hugs are less likely to get colds, and if they do catch a bug it will be less severe.

The ripple effect

Just one single act of kindness can create a domino effect that benefits dozens of people. A friendly chat with a neighbor walking her dog can lift her spirits and help her be kinder to the barista at the coffee shop. That worker in turn might be kinder to the next customer he serves.

"The larger ties that bind us — ties of love, connection, purpose — have ripple effects on our health and the world at large," Harding says. "Every individual has way more influence than they think they have. Your choices don't just impact the person that is across from you. They can also impact that person's friends and family. It's like a lovely ripple effect of kindness."



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