Being a nice person is not the same as being kind. Why the difference is so important

Jocelyn Solis-Moreira, CNN

When my father died of bone cancer last year, I received an outpouring of messages from friends and family sharing their condolences.

While I appreciated everyone who reached out, I was especially grateful for two of my former college roommates who surprised my family with a delivery of bagels for breakfast. Although there was a mix-up with the address and we never saw those bagels, this act of kindness stuck with me. It was the intention that mattered more than the actual food.

There's a difference between nice and being kind—even our bodies recognize the distinction. Kindness not only pours a lot of good into the world, but it's also good for one's own health. It doesn't take much to harness the power of kindness, and it can be as simple as wishing someone a good day over text.

Being nice versus being kind

When was the last time you were nice? You might recall saluting a veteran for their service or greeting a stranger. Being nice involves being polite and pleasing to others. This might feel less authentic and rewarding than performing kind acts, said Dr. Carla Marie Manly, a clinical psychologist and author of the upcoming book, "The Joy of Imperfect Love."

“If you’re people pleasing, you’re placing an expectation on the person you’re being nice to that they respond to you in a certain way,” Manly said.

Niceness can be used as a social strategy to get into someone’s good graces, she said. Think about the last time you complimented someone’s outfit but didn’t actually mean it. Did you do it to make them like you or did you feel obligated to comment on their new look since everyone else did?

Being kind is less self-serving, said Dr. Ash Nadkarni, an associate psychiatrist and director of wellness at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Massachusetts. On the one hand, kindness involves being generous without expecting to get nothing in return. The other half is the purpose behind the action. A kind person is acting out of compassion and genuine concern for another.

The difference is intentionality, said Dr. Catherine Franssen, an associate professor of psychology at Longwood University in Virginia, noting that a kind person tries to really understand what someone else is going through.

Practicing kindness rather than niceness allows people to foster deeper genuine connections with others, said Franssen. The more you do it, the easier it will get to relate to others and build more meaningful relationships in all aspects of life.

How kindness affects your body

When people act kindly, the brain releases a hormone called oxytocin. Popularly known as the “love hormone,” oxytocin is used to promote social connection with others. Nadkarni said that the influx of oxytocin in the brain dampens activity in the amygdala, a region involved in fear and anxiety. “It suppresses the fear sensation and has a powerful impact on the socioemotional functions of the brain.”

If you have ever felt less stressed from helping others, it’s all thanks to the calming effects of oxytocin. It reduces cortisol, the stress hormone that triggers inflammation and a fight-or-flight response when the body senses a potential threat, be it a wild animal or an email from your boss.

Along with less cortisol, Nadkarni said oxytocin helps with keeping your heart strong and healthy. The hormone releases nitric oxide, which dilates blood vessels and, in turn, reduces blood pressure.

“Oxytocin has wide-ranging functions and is really impactful to our health,” said Nadkarni. “Not only does it enhance social connection and improve cardiovascular health, but it also ensures inflammation goes down. (Chronic) inflammation is the basis for a lot of different diseases such as diabetes and depression.”

Your brain on kindness

The warm feeling you get from performing an act of kindness is your brain releasing a ton of feel-good chemicals. Franssen said being kind boosts production of serotonin, a neurotransmitter involved in mood, including happiness. Kindness also releases dopamine, a brain chemical in charge of reward and pleasure. It's the reason why doing one act of kindness feels so good that you want to do another.

Franssen said kindness can secrete endorphins, chemicals in the body that activate the opiate system — the same hormones that make up a runner's high. Endorphins promote pleasure and act as a natural pain reliever for both physical and emotional pain. "When we do kind things for others and somebody does something unkind to us, it does not feel as bad," she added.

Random acts of kindness you can do today

Being kind gives the same health benefits, regardless of how big or small the gesture. Below are some good deeds you can do, starting right now.

- Pick up litter
- Check in on a friend who is going through a rough patch
- Donate blood
- Text someone good morning
- Hold the door open for someone
- Surprise your parents with a visit
- Send a positive message
- Leave a generous tip for a server
- Be an active listener
- Cook a meal for someone in need

Acts of kindness might feel strange and out-of-character at first. However, Manly said this feeling goes away the more you keep practicing. Soon enough, it becomes so familiar you'll notice the benefits on yourself and others.

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