

# HOW KINDFULNESS CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE

Science shows that being kind can be transformative, even when it's as simple as making a cuppa **BY CHANTELLE HORTON**

**T**here's no getting away from it, Christmas is coming, so it seems a good time to remember the true spirit of the season. That's what World Kindness Day on November 13 is about. We're all being encouraged to do a kind act for ourselves, for others or for the planet.

And now the mindfulness movement is also helping us see the benefits of kindness. "Mindfulness is a state achieved by focusing on the present moment while calmly accepting your thoughts and feelings. Kindness is being compassionate. So kindness is being aware and accepting of your feelings, while demonstrating care towards

yourself and others," explains Caroline Millington, author of *Kindfulness*. Her book comes hot on the heels of psychotherapist Padraig O'Morain's *Kindfulness: Be A True Friend To Yourself With Mindful Self-Compassion*. He believes kindness is pertinent right now. "People are feeling insecure because of economic and political challenges, and this leads to an appreciation of kindness," he says. Plus, studies show kindness can make us happier, lower blood pressure and slow some of the effects of ageing.\* While kindness involves being kind to yourself and to others, too much of one without the other, and we risk becoming either self-



centred on a doormat. Here's how to get a good balance.

## BE KIND TO YOURSELF

Think of self-kindness and you might picture drinking a glass of wine in a bath. While that's undoubtedly lovely, truly being kind to yourself runs deeper. Pádraig explains: "Psychologists believe a part of our mind is relentlessly self-critical. We must actively choose to be self-compassionate and learn to put that critic in its place - or we'll go through life disliking ourselves, which lots of people do."

Don't think that doing this means being selfish either. "Treating yourself kindly isn't about stepping over others to get what you want. But making your happiness your number one priority is contagious and if you make yourself happier, you'll be motivated to ensure your loved ones are happy, too," says Caroline.

It's important to watch how you speak to yourself, says Brooke Jones, VP of Randomactsofkindness.org. "Try to talk to yourself the way you would speak to a loved one," she says. Whenever you feel the urge to berate yourself, for example by thinking "you're such an idiot", imagine somebody else is saying that same thing to someone you care about. The thought will probably make your blood boil - so it'll be easier for you to realise just how damaging (and ultimately unhelpful) it is to castigate yourself constantly. It's not about going through life without striving for change or recognising your mistakes, but about critiquing yourself with more rationality and compassion.

### DO YOUR OWN DEVELOPMENT REVIEW

An important aspect of kindness is to take control of your future happiness. Caroline says a good way to do this is with a personal development review: "At work we're used to performance reviews to get feedback and discuss goals and we should be doing the same with our lives." But - you guessed it - your review must be done kindly. "This is about designing a happier future for yourself, not ripping your self-esteem to shreds," says Caroline.

Try using a Wheel of Life (Thecoachingtoolscompany.com has a free template). You mark out of 10 how you're feeling about everything from career, finances, health and friendships then decide how you want that number to change in a chosen time frame. The idea is to come away with a list of specific goals to start taking your life in the direction you want. Goals could be anything from "save £5 a week until spring" to "book in one girls' night a month". Evaluating what will make you happier - and then making it happen - is the ultimate act of self-kindness.

### DINE SOLO

When you've got an evening on your own, do you often reach for the cereal box instead of bothering to make

dinner? "If you feel that putting effort into cooking for yourself isn't worth it, that tells you a lot about your degree of self-compassion - or lack of it," says Pdraig.

There are several mental health benefits to focused activities like cooking, and culinary therapy is sometimes even used as a complementary treatment for disorders such as depression and anxiety. But how do you cook a meal with kindness? Pdraig recommends: "Make a healthy meal for yourself with the same care you'd devote to a guest. Once you've prepared the meal, sit down and take your time to eat. Think about the good each mouthful is doing - not just nutritionally, but in taking time out for yourself."

## BE KIND TO OTHERS

Treating other people kindly is not only the right thing to do (duh), but it also has surprising health benefits - which makes everyone a winner! Jolie Goodman from the Mental Health Foundation explains: "There's a strong correlation between the wellbeing and longevity of people who are compassionate. Acts of kindness, such as sending a handwritten thank-you note to a loved one, can reduce stress and decrease pain by stimulating the brain to release endorphins, which are powerful natural painkillers."

A study by the University of California asked people to either perform random acts of kindness or to buy themselves something over a six-week period. After the experiment concluded, the people who'd performed kind acts for others reported higher levels of positive emotions than those who had rewarded themselves instead.

Are you thinking that a daily act of kindness takes too much commitment? Brooke disagrees. "Every day in my car I make a point of letting someone into traffic in front of me," she says. "It sounds silly, but it's one of the biggest struggles for other drivers." If you don't drive, stop a stranger and compliment their outfit, buy someone you don't know a coffee or ask the person struggling with bags at the supermarket if they need a helping hand. As Brooke says: "Look for opportunities to be kind and you'll start to see that they are everywhere."

Not only will you be helping someone, but you'll also get a brain boost. "The good feeling we get when we do something kind is due to elevated levels of dopamine in the brain," says David. "We get a natural high, often called the 'Helper's High.'"

## PAY IT FORWARD

If you can find the time to volunteer you'll really feel the benefits. Helpfulpeeps.com connects people who need a hand with something - whether that's moving furniture or learning another language - with people who will help for free. All you need to do is sign up, indicate what your skills are and you'll be part of the UK's kindest online

social marketplace. Alternatively, look at [Ncvo.org.uk](http://Ncvo.org.uk) for voluntary roles near you.

What's more, your volunteering may have a domino effect. According to a joint study by the University of California, University of Cambridge and University of Plymouth, when we see someone help another person it gives us a good feeling, which in turn causes us to go out and do something altruistic. So once you start, others will follow.

#### **WORK IT - KINDLY**

Whether you're best mates with your colleagues or can't stand the sight of them, practising kindness in the office will create a happier and more productive workplace. "Make a workmate a surprise cup of tea or seek out a chat with a colleague who seems to be having a bad day," Jolie suggests. The cliché is that you need to bust balls and instil fear to be taken seriously in the workplace, especially if you're a woman - but nowadays, more companies are recognising the value of kindness. A study by the [University of Warwick](#) revealed that people who are happy at work are 12% more productive than those who are unhappy. So by deploying kindness, you'll ensure your whole team is doing a better job and gets better results. *✍*



Photography: Getty Images Source: \*Journal of Psychoneuroendocrinology