

# COMPASSIONOMICS

Kindness is a word that is so familiar, it may have lost its power and meaning at times. But kindness, when we really understand it, is a superpower. The issue is not with the concept of kindness but perhaps how we interpret it and how we define it. According to the American Psychological Association, kindness is “benevolent and helpful action intentionally directed toward another person.” The motivation is therefore important. The aim of kindness is to do something to improve another person’s wellbeing rather than doing something to gain a reward or to get ourselves out of trouble! We can call it kindness but some researchers call it ‘pro-social’ behaviour. This term includes any act aimed at benefitting another person and includes acts of kindness as well as efforts to improve the wider world, like through volunteering regularly or fundraising.

A paper in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology breaks kindness down into 4 different types of kindness:

**Kin kindness** – being kind to your family

**Mutualism** – being kind to members of your community

**Reciprocal altruism** – being kind to those you’ll meet again

**Competitive altruism** – being kind to others when it will enhance your status.

Kindness, or being pro-social, benefits others and it benefits us too. Dr Kelli Harding, author of the Rabbit Effect and Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Columbia University, says the research is very clear. Kindness is as beneficial for the giver as the receiver and evidence shows that people who volunteer even live longer! A meta-analysis that included studies in adults over the age of 55 found that volunteering was associated with a 24 per cent lower risk of mortality, on average, over a given period of time!

Kindness is a superpower and even a super drug it seems. Studies over years have concluded that when patients feel more cared for by their nurse or doctor, they don’t get sick as often and actually get better, quicker! If patients feel they have been shown empathy, the research points out the following list of incredible facts.

- If a person has a cold, it is likely to be shorter and less severe.
- Hospitalisation rates are reduced for diabetics.
- They will feel less post operative pain.
- They will be discharged faster after surgery and need 50% less medication.
- There is a reduction in patient anxiety and an increase in peacefulness.
- Survival rates of cancer patients are boosted.

This kindness, empathy and compassion doesn't have to take long. In **'Compassionomics: The Revolutionary Scientific Evidence That Caring Makes a Difference'**, the authors, both doctors, discuss a range of compelling research about the role of compassion in medicine. They look at a study conducted in 2004 which looked at anxiety in cancer patients. The study looked at various possible interventions and their impact on patients. They found that when a medical professional showed compassion, gave words of empathy and support, the patient's anxiety levels decreased. This was a randomised controlled trial and the intervention was timed the massive impact on patients took only 40 seconds.

Just think for a moment, on the impact of these studies on kindness interventions. If people's illness or symptoms can be reduced, they therefore stay out of hospital or get discharged quicker, then that is less people in hospital taking up beds. That frees up money, space, time and people. It is unlikely that you will hear a politician say that kindness and compassion is their strategy to improve the NHS and mental health provision and clearly, it won't solve all the problems. But the research shows it will solve a number of issues. Perhaps it's better we start somewhere, perhaps we can all start by showing more kindness and see where it could lead!

## APPLICATION

If kindness and compassion can have such a dramatic effect in a medical setting, it stands to reason that it may well work in other contexts too. Schools are, by their very nature, full of young people. Young people who are navigating challenging circumstances at home, may suffer from energy poverty, food shortages or the poverty of love and aspiration. They may be young carers, they may be being bullied, they could be in with a group of people who are not good for them. Even if they have none of that, they are just growing up and, as we can all probably testify, that isn't always an easy process in the best of circumstances.

We also have thousands of adults across our schools; some whose lives are going well and others who are hanging on by their fingertips. We have those who are bereaved, those who have been diagnosed with something out of the blue, those getting married, those getting divorced, those who are finding parenting their own children a challenge and those battling infertility. Kindness CAN help. 40 seconds of thoughtful interaction to show compassion, empathy and kindness is all it takes to make a difference.

**This is all our gift to give and we should give it. Why? Well, because there are 4 research-based findings of the benefits of kindness:**

**Kindness buffers stress** – Dr Harding says practicing kindness can lower cortisol and decrease depression and anxiety. Kindness can be used as a stress management technique much like meditation and exercise – and it can also be free!

**Kindness is good for your heart** – It cultivates your feelings of social support and lessens stress. The less stress you have, the healthier you are. The effects of kindness protect your heart.

**Kindness is good for different areas of your mental health** – Some research shows that showing kindness toward YOURSELF can be a way of alleviating depression and social anxiety. One study showed that the more acts of kindness you fill your life with, the more it boosts your own happiness. It doesn't have to be onerous. The research suggests that setting an intention to do one act of kindness per day for one week was enough to increase joy!

**Kindness increases your life expectancy** – Harding refers to a specific type of kindness called loving-kindness meditation which focuses kind thoughts on yourself first and then on to other people. It has been found to protect a part of your DNA that is a biological marker for aging. Studies show 12 weeks of this type of meditation can have an impact.

## QUESTIONS

Showing kindness to others and having kindness shown to us has huge benefits. When sometimes we don't know what we can do to help a colleague, a young person or even ourselves, we can all start by being kind. But first we need to untangle some of what we already do, so here are 3 questions to help you do just that.

1. Think back over the last couple of days. Where did you deliberately show someone else kindness? Where were you shown kindness? What impact did both of those incidences have on you and your mood?
2. There are some young people and some colleagues of yours who are having a difficult time right now, they may be short of things that are helping. You may not know all the details – you don't need to. Think of their names now. What can you do today that will show them kindness? It can be a kind word, an encouragement, noticing something they did or thanking them for something they did for you.
3. As leaders and teachers in schools, where do we explicitly teach these things to our young people? Where do we give them the chance to experience kindness, to show kindness and to know what the research says about the importance of kindness? Not all of them will have been taught about kindness. Some of them will have experienced very little of it. Some of them will have been told it is something that it is not.

If clinical studies show us that the patient-clinician relationship is more statistically significant than using aspirin to reduce the risk of heart attack, and more statistically significant than the effect of giving up smoking on male mortality, then perhaps it can also reduce violence, increase engagement in lessons and improve attendance. Therefore, it is perhaps not an impossible stretch to think it could also lead to improved results.

And one more thing, kindness is not something to be cliquy about. It can be given to those we think are the most deserving of it and perhaps the least deserving. It is sometimes those who appear to want it the least, that sometimes need it the most.



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