

Not-so-random Acts of kindness

by Rex Morgan

Have you heard of “random acts of kindness”? Have you ever received one? Or given one to others?

The concept began in California in 1982 when a journalist, Anne Herbert, jotted the phrase “practice random kindness and senseless acts of beauty” on a restaurant placemat. Ten years later she wrote a book recounting true stories of random kindness.

The idea caught on, was taken up by a number of media outlets, and began to appear on bumper stickers and the like.

A Random Acts of Kindness Foundation was established in the USA in 1995. It is a non-profit organisation with the mission of inspiring others to make spreading kindness a priority. It has a website¹ offering free resources to encourage and educate the public about the power of kindness to change the world, under the slogan “Making kindness the norm”.

In 2007, the concept made its way to the big screen. In the film *Evan Almighty*, God, played by Morgan Freeman, tells Evan the way to change the world is by doing one random act of kindness every day.

NZ website

New Zealand has its own Random Acts of Kindness website (rak.co.nz), established by a group of four friends in 2004. One of them was stuck in Auckland traffic one afternoon and watched some irate drivers ahead of him getting into a bit of a road rage fracas. He asked

himself the question “What would it be like if on one day every person in New Zealand was kind to a stranger?” This led to the founding of the first Random Acts of Kindness (RAK) Day in NZ, in 2005. This was in fact the first RAK Day in the world, and NZ is still the only country in the world with a national RAK Day that touches the whole country.

Co-founder of RAK Day in NZ, Megan Singleton, says: “We chose 1 September to be RAK Day, as it was easy to remember: the first day of spring. Then we set out to let the country know and to inspire Kiwis to come up with some fun and crazy ways to surprise and delight others. For no reason at all”.

Singleton urges Kiwis to become “RAKtivists”. “We’ve never needed RAK Day more than in these Covid times”, she remarks. “It’s a fantastic concept because, let’s face it, everyone could do with a little kindness in their life—it’s contagious.

A smile from a stranger, a cupcake, or someone paying for your coffee—it’s the unexpected that brightens your day, giving you a warm fuzzy, that’s the key. RAK Day is a simple way for businesses and individuals to step outside of their comfort zone and to see for themselves that giving is even better than receiving!”

Two thousand years ago the Bible declared that “it is more blessed to give than to receive”.² Modern research has shown up the accuracy of this statement by proving scientifically that kindness is beneficial to our health. The RAK Foundation website cites many of these benefits, including decreased stress, anxiety and depression, boosted happiness and pleasure, and even lower blood pressure.

Benefits of kindness

According to research from Emory University, when you are kind to another person, your brain’s



Try out this kindness idea: take the time to really listen to someone.



Another kindness idea: be a blood donor.

relationships. He has coined the word “kindfulness” to describe being constantly mindful of being kind to others. “No matter what you do, do it with kindness”, he urges.

Research findings

Numerous studies have been carried out on the health effects of kindness. Here are some of the findings.

- “About half of participants in one study reported that they feel stronger and more energetic after helping others; many also reported feeling calmer and less depressed, with increased feelings of self-worth”, noted Christine Carter of the UC Berkeley, Greater Good Science Centre.⁸
- The Integrative Psychological and Behavioural Science Study in 1998 concluded that “Perpetually kind people have 23% less cortisol (the stress hormone) and age more slowly than the average population”.⁹
- In a University of British Columbia study, a group of highly anxious individuals performed at least six acts of kindness a week. After one month, there was a significant increase in positive moods and relationship satisfaction, and a decrease in social avoidance.¹⁰

pleasure and reward centres light up, as if you were the recipient of the good deed, rather than the giver. This phenomenon is called the “helper’s high”.³

Talya Steinberg, Psy.D, wrote in *Psychology Today*: “Numerous studies have shown that receiving, giving or even witnessing acts of kindness increases immunity and the production of serotonin. This feel-good chemical heals your wounds, calms you down, and makes you happy...Even just thinking and talking about kindness can improve happiness and peace”.⁴

As well as stimulating serotonin, performing acts of kindness “helps boost your psychological health by activating the release of dopamine, the feel-good neurotransmitter in the

brain”, stated Lizette Borrelli, in the *Medical Daily*.⁵

According to David R. Hamilton, PhD, writer, columnist, speaker, and “kindness scientist”,⁶ acts of kindness create emotional warmth, which releases a hormone known as oxytocin. Oxytocin causes the release of nitric oxide, which dilates (expands) the blood vessels. This reduces blood pressure and, therefore, oxytocin is known as a “cardioprotective” hormone. It protects the heart by lowering blood pressure.⁷

Dr Hamilton has authored 11 books, including the Amazon bestseller, *The Five Side Effects of Kindness*. His studies show that kindness makes us happier, slows ageing, is good for the heart, and improves

A dose of “happy hormones”

Did you know you have a quartet of chemicals coursing through your bloodstream, known as the “happy hormones”? These chemicals, which promote happiness, pleasure and other positive moods and feelings, include:

Dopamine: Also known as the “feel good hormone”, dopamine is associated with pleasurable sensations, as well as learning, memory and more;

Oxytocin: Often called the “love hormone”, oxytocin helps promote trust, empathy, and bonding in relationships;

Serotonin: A powerful antidepressant, which helps regulate your mood as well as your sleep, appetite, digestion, memory, and learning ability;

Endorphins: The body’s natural painkillers, produced in response to stress or discomfort, flooding us with a sense of euphoria known as “the runner’s high”.

The acronym for these four wonderful helpers is D.O.S.E., and clearly we can all do with a generous dose of them! The more of these hormones our body produces, the better we feel.

Scientific studies have shown over and over that all four of these helpful hormones are stimulated by acts of kindness. You have most likely noticed that you feel good after showing kindness and helping someone in some way. The kinder you are, the more these good hormones will flow inside you, making you feel happier and healthier!

The accompanying article delves further into the science and benefits of kindness.

• Dr. Stephen Post of Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine found that when we give of ourselves, everything from life satisfaction to self-realisation and physical health are significantly improved. Mortality is delayed, depression is reduced, and well-being and good fortune are increased.¹¹

Witnessing kindness

What is more, these benefits are reaped not only by those who practice kindness, but also those who witness kindness, according to Natalie Angier, writing for *The New York Times*. “Witnessing acts of kindness produces oxytocin, occasionally referred to as the ‘love hormone’, which aids in lowering blood pressure and improving our overall heart-health. Oxytocin also increases our self-esteem and optimism, which is extra helpful when we’re anxious or shy in a social situation.”¹²

“One good deed in a crowded area can create a domino effect and improve the day of dozens of people!” according to Jamil Zaki, Assistant Professor of Psychology at Stanford University in an article for *Scientific American*. “The positive effects of kindness are experienced in the brain of everyone who witnessed the act, improving their mood and making them significantly more likely to ‘pay it forward’”.¹³

No wonder renowned writer Henry James said: “Three things in human life are important. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. And the third is to be kind”. Aviator and author Amelia Earhart observed: “A single act of kindness throws out roots in all directions, and the roots spring up and make new trees”.

American author and motivational speaker Leo Buscaglia, also known as “Dr Love”, commented: “Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of

Some kindness ideas to try out...

Carry out a random act of kindness, with no expectation of reward, safe in the knowledge that one day someone might do the same for you.

Diana, Princess of Wales

Small gestures can really brighten someone else’s day. Here are a few ways you can spread smiles and kindness wherever you go.

- Give an unexpected compliment.
- Make a handmade card.
- Volunteer at a local foodbank.
- Call and chat to someone you think might be lonely.
- Pick up litter in your local area.
- Smile at everyone you encounter.
- Let someone go in front of you in a queue.
- Help someone struggling with their grocery bags.
- Stop to assist someone who looks lost.
- Take the time to really listen to someone.
- Donate flowers to a rest home.
- Give another driver the right of way.
- Pass along a compliment to staff at the supermarket.
- Learn CPR.
- Turn the lights off when you leave a room.
- Wash a friend or family member’s car or bike for them.
- Buy a lottery ticket and give it to a stranger.
- Leave a surprise in a library book.
- Give away your parking spot.
- Bake someone a cake.
- Give blood.
- Offer to buy a drink or some food for a homeless person.
- Spend time to get to know your neighbours.
- Address a waiter or server by name.
- Donate clothes to a charity shop.
- Offer to help someone.
- Carry in a neighbour’s rubbish bin.
- Treat someone to a coffee or tea (even a stranger).
- Leave a place better than the way you found it.

which have the potential to turn a life around”. Kindness can change someone’s whole life for the better!

Regular rather than random

If showing kindness is so positive and beneficial, why only have just one Random Acts of Kindness Day each year? Surely we should do it more often!

Modern science has discovered the many benefits of being kind, but

when you look at the Bible, it turns out that God knew a long time ago about the benefits of kindness, and encourages us to engage in regular rather than random acts of kindness.

King Solomon, reputed to be the wisest man who ever lived, stated: “Those who are kind benefit themselves, but the cruel bring ruin on themselves”.¹⁴ In other words, if we are kind to others we are helping ourselves at the same time. Precisely



Be kind, New Zealand!

“Be kind. We will get through this together, so please be strong and be kind.” Those words of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, announcing New Zealand’s first Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020, have become part of New Zealand folklore. The “Be kind” catch cry has subsequently been often repeated in efforts to exhort the “team of 5 million” as we continue to confront the pandemic that has turned society on its head.

In today’s dog-eat-dog competitive environment, kindness to one another can so easily be overlooked and pushed out of the way. However, although it is often a scarce commodity, kindness is truly a quality of great value and worth.

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine a world in which every person and every nation practice genuine kindness all of the time. Just think what such a world would be like! There would be no more burglaries, rapes, child abuse, murders—in fact all crime would come to a sudden halt, as would all fighting and warfare. These harmful evils would completely cease if only everyone always treated each other with kindness. What a dramatically better world that would be!

Kindness is something we are all eager to receive from others, but not always that quick to reciprocate. “Be kind”. It sounds simple, even trite and superficial, but it’s not easy to put into practice. Why not? Because it involves thinking of the needs of others rather than ourselves. That demands a kind of discipline and sacrifice our egotistical human nature prefers to resist.

But when we do practice kindness, it is as beneficial to us as it is to those we help. In her decisions in handling the Covid pandemic, our Prime Minister has repeatedly stated that the government is being guided by scientific advice. Interestingly, we can also be guided by science when it comes to the practice of being kind. Scientific research has identified many benefits to be gained from exercising kindness. The accompanying article outlines a number of these.

If we let the science guide us, we will be eager to follow the catch cry: “Be kind, New Zealand!”

what recent scientific research has discovered!

The New Testament writer Paul said: “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you”.¹⁵ Christians are admonished to engage in kindness and compassion as their everyday lifestyle. Kindness is one of the fundamental components of God’s nature. His sending of Jesus to be our Saviour was a remarkable act of divine kindness.¹⁶

Paul also exhorted his readers that “each of us should please our neighbours for their good, to build them up”.¹⁷ In other words, as Jesus himself put it, “Do to others what you would like them to do to you”,¹⁸ a statement so famous that it is known as the “golden rule”. That’s another way of saying that each of us should

engage in acts of kindness as a habitual way of life, regularly rather than just randomly.

The RAK websites include many suggested acts of kindness we can put into effect. We have listed some examples in the box on page 5. See how many of them you can incorporate into your lifestyle! There is no doubt that we would all be much better off if “random” acts of kindness were not so random, but rather, frequent!

Notes

- 1 <https://www.randomactsofkindness.org>.
- 2 Acts 20:35.
- 3 <http://www.ccnl.emory.edu/Publicity/MSNBC.HTM>.
- 4 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/in-the-face-adversity/201211/practicing-acts-kindness>.

⁵ <https://www.medicaldaily.com/random-acts-kindness-sweet-emotion-helping-others-dopamine-levels-383563>.

⁶ <https://drdavidhamilton.com/>.

⁷ <https://drdavidhamilton.com/the-5-side-effects-of-kindness/>.

⁸ <https://www.amazon.com/Raising-Happiness-Simple-Happier-Parents/dp/0345515625/>.

⁹ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/9737736/>

¹⁰ <https://psych.ubc.ca/news/kindness-may-help-socially-anxious-people-relax-says-new-research-by-dr-lynn-alden/>.

¹¹ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/7840821_Altruism_Happiness_and_Health_It's_Good_to_Be_Good.

¹² https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/24/science/24angier.html?_r=1&partner=rss&emc=rss.

¹³ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/kindness-contagion/>.

¹⁴ Proverbs 11:17.

¹⁵ Ephesians 4:32.

¹⁶ Titus 3:4.

¹⁷ Romans 15:2.

¹⁸ Matthew 7:12.

The kindness jab?

Wouldn't it be great if kindness could be bottled up in a laboratory and made into a vaccine for mass inoculation? When you think of the ills and evils of society it is clear we need a generous dose of kindness to be injected into millions of people. People who receive the kindness jab would begin to spread regular acts of kindness, putting an end to arguments, hatred, bitterness and strife! Just imagine if a pandemic of coronavirus was replaced with a pandemic of kindness!

Kindness has a contagious quality about it: one act of love and kindness is prone to lead to another. But sadly, it is not easy to find kindness on a widespread scale. There are too many determined anti-vaxxers who resist the kindness vaccine in favour of the insidious disease of selfishness.

Two thousand years ago the biblical writer James identified a lack of kindness as a root cause behind the troubles of humanity. "Where do wars and fighting come from?" he asked, and concluded that it was from human selfishness and greed, our innate resistance to acting with kindness and love towards others.¹

The Bible asserts that humans are just naturally like this,² and it has been that way throughout all of history.³ And haven't the annals of history proved this analysis to be true? An article in the New York Times estimated that "Of the past 3,400 years, humans have been entirely at peace for 268 of them. At least 108 million people were killed

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in wars in the twentieth century. Estimates for the total number killed in wars throughout all of human history range from 150 million to 1 billion".⁴

Thankfully, the Bible goes on to supply the solution to this dilemma. It claims that it is possible for humans to change! It is possible for us to become kind and loving on a regular basis.

Thousands of years of history testify to the fact that we can't do this on our own, no matter how hard we try. The Bible asserts that such love and kindness is available to us from a source beyond ourselves. That source is God, who gives kindness, love, peace and other beautiful qualities of character to mankind by means of a special helper known as the Holy Spirit.⁵

"Every good gift comes from above", affirms James, "from God, the father of light".⁶ Kindness, as well as qualities such as self-control, gentleness, and joy, come from the Holy Spirit, and God is pleased to give that Spirit to anyone who asks him for it.⁷

Would you like to have a kindness jab like this? For more information, please write to Inside Life, P O Box 304055, Hauraki Corner, Auckland.

Notes

¹ James 4:1-4

² Jeremiah 17:9

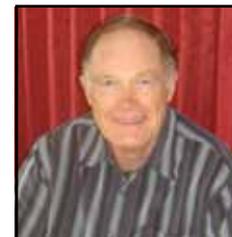
³ Romans 3:23

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/06/books/chapters/what-every-person-should-know-about-war.html>

⁵ Galatians 5:22

⁶ James 1:17

⁷ Luke 11:13



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