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## The Science Behind Kindness and How It Benefits Your Health

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The Science of Health Podcast

The Science Behind Kindness and How It Benefits Your H...

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The simple human act of kindness has numerous health benefits. It can help you experience fewer aches and pain and lower your blood pressure. It can protect your overall health twice as much as aspirin protects against heart disease. It's free, widely available and has no side effects. UH Rainbow psychiatrist [Marcie Hall, MD](#), explains the research-backed benefits of kindness – and how you can develop this powerful habit.

### Podcast Transcript

#### Macie Jepson

So, Pete, I knew we were going to get together today. And when I tell you I was going to buy you a cup of coffee, I'm not kidding. I really, I thought about it. And then I ran out of time. I'm sorry.

#### Pete Kenworthy

It's the thought that counts, right? I mean, that's what they say, but it turns out the action actually counts more, right? We're talking about kindness, the quality of being friendly and considerate and should be basic in daily living, right? But what if being kind to people could actually make you live longer, right? Decrease your stress level, maybe even help with aches and pains.

#### Macie Jepson

Hi everybody. I'm Macie Jepson.

**Pete Kenworthy**

And I'm Pete Kenworthy. And this is Healthy@UH. I've never been part of that kindness chain. Is that what they call it? When someone buys your coffee and then you, in turn, buy someone else's coffee. I mean, it's something I've always wanted to do, but I've been reading about kindness and gratitude and the happiness that it brings people.

**Macie Jepson**

You know, me, too, because we both thought we wanted to do something on kindness. And I've learned a lot about this. Whether you're the giver, you're the receiver, or you simply just witness kindness being given to somebody else, you reap tremendous benefits to your health. And it made me start wondering if you don't experience kindness in your life, what are the ramifications to your health then? Hmm. So, we've invited Dr. Marcie Hall, University Hospitals psychiatrist to break down the science behind kindness. Thank you for joining us, Doctor.

**Dr. Marcie Hall**

Thanks so much for having me.

**Macie Jepson**

So, speaking of science, in an article in *Psychology Today*, it's called *What We Get When We Give*, it points out some tangible benefits to kindness. People who volunteer tend to experience fewer aches and pains. Giving help to others protects overall health twice as much as aspirin protects against heart disease? I mean, what? Spending actually on other people decreases your blood pressure. So, in general terms, cause we're going to break this down later, but let's just start with why is that?

**Dr. Marcie Hall**

So, that is a great question. And over the past 25 years, more and more people have gotten interested in that question. So, there's been more research done in this area, which is really exciting, because the thing about kindness is that it's completely free. You don't have to invest any money. You don't have to, it matters not at all how much, you know, you financially can contribute. It's also contagious, like you said. One person can start something, and it can be picked up upon by others. And it's teachable. So, people can learn kindness. It's not a virtue or a quality that you're born with. Although people are born to be kind, we're also born with the capacity to be unkind. So, it's really important that you recognize it as being more of a practice, more of a habit and less of a personal quality. And it is really important. And those are very true, all those statements that you made, Macie, are very true. And it's thrilling to think that something free, widely available with no side effects can do something so astounding.

**Pete Kenworthy**

So, let's break down kindness just for the purpose of this conversation. Like what exactly are we talking about? I mean, are we talking about letting someone into traffic? Like, does that count as being kind? Or is it buying something for a stranger? Like what counts. I'm guessing this is a huge broad platform of things.

**Dr. Marcie Hall**

Absolutely. There are so many different ways to be kind. It's almost impossible to sort of make a concise list, but you're exactly right. So, it's essentially being helpful, being courteous, being kind of generous with your, with yourself really, not necessarily financially, but certainly financially is one piece of that. And it's just, again, a habit of giving of yourself in that way that is courteous, helpful, generous.

**Pete Kenworthy**

Putting other first? Is that kind of a way of looking at it? Or is it not just that?

**Dr. Marcie Hall**

So, putting others first is, it can be part of that, but you don't want to do that at the expense of yourself, because then that can lead to some negatives. When we're suggesting people be kind, it's really more to enhance your life and the lives of those around you, not necessarily putting yourself in any kind of disadvantage.

**Macie Jepson**

Let's get back to the science of things, though. Exactly what happens to the body when you're kind? I mean, is it your brain that changes? Is it something physiological that changes? I'm sure serotonin is mixed up in there somewhere.

**Dr. Marcie Hall**

So, kindness generates a response in your brain. And certain chemicals called neurotransmitters are responsible for communicating around the different parts of your brain, and they are in charge of your mood essentially. So, one of the important neurotransmitters that we see an increase in when we are kind is oxytocin, and that is responsible for feeling an increased sense of connectedness, an increased sense of trust. People sometimes call it like the cuddle hormone or the attachment hormone. And it's what helps societies bond. It helps keep groups of people together. It's like a filial response that we have physically. So, by increasing oxytocin, we can experience a connectedness with kin essentially. And kindness, K I N, is sort of a connecting kind of a word. So, oxytocin promotes social bonding, and it also can lower your blood pressure. It can dilate your blood vessels so that your heart actually receives more oxygen. So, what happens when you experience, or as a giver or a receiver, is that your oxytocin levels increase, your blood vessels dilate, your cardiovascular health improves. So, kindness is cardioprotective. It actually literally protects your heart. It strengthens your immune system. It improves your energy. It reduces aches and pains like you mentioned, and it can lead to a longer lifespan. In the process, you also experienced an increase in self-esteem. So, you're living longer and feeling better about yourself. And oxytocin is the mediator between kindness and those benefits to you, to your actual physical health.

**Pete Kenworthy**

So, oxytocin is what's behind all of those things?

**Dr. Marcie Hall**

No.

**Pete Kenworthy**

OK.

**Dr. Marcie Hall**

So, there are other neurotransmitters involved as well. So, you mentioned serotonin. So, serotonin can increase feelings of satisfaction. A lot of our medications that we use to treat depression and anxiety utilize serotonin because it does decrease feelings of depression. It decreases anxiety. It helps you feel more relaxed. So, by increasing serotonin, kindness is able to decrease feelings of depression and anxiety and increase your happiness. And then another benefit is that it increases your endorphins. And you may have heard of those associated with exercise. So, when people go for a long run, they often experience what's called a runner's high, and that's from a release of endorphins. And what we see in kindness research is a helper's high, where it's sort of the same feeling. And I for one hate exercise. So, I much prefer to just be kind because I can get the same rush of endorphins that is certainly more enjoyable, and I don't love to run.

So, I get my helpers high instead of a runner's high. And then another thing that kindness does is it decreases cortisol in our, in our bodies. And cortisol is sort of known as the stress hormone. And what cortisol does is it kind of prepares your body for fight or flight. And in, in stressful situations, that can be helpful. But what's happening now is that we're in a really particularly stressful time in our lives. And we're watching perhaps difficult stories on the news. We're reading about things that are upsetting to us. And so, we're in a particularly high state of stress a lot of the time. And cortisol can lead to feelings of isolation, hopelessness. So, by decreasing cortisol, which is what kindness does, we can actually really experience a relief from that. So, cortisol is partially responsible for holding onto belly fat and making us age. So, by decreasing cortisol through acts of kindness, you can actually literally slow down the aging process, and you can, in fact, lose weight more easily, if that's your goal.

**Macie Jepson**

OK. I'm sold.

**Pete Kenworthy**

I mean, it sounds, the way you're describing it, it's like kindness is like a medicine almost, right?

**Dr. Marcie Hall**

Absolutely. It is better than the medicine again, because there's no side effects. It's free and, you know, there's nothing...there's no real drawback to it that, you know, you mentioned earlier, is it at the expense of your own self? And you don't know because you actually want to be kind to yourself as well. So, even in preparing for meeting with you guys today, I was sort of reviewing some kindness literature, and I thought, oh, why am I not volunteering at a soup kitchen three times a week? Why am I not doing more kind acts for people? And then I realized I was beating myself up. And so, I don't want to do that either. So, I have to just take every opportunity that I see in my day to day life to extend kindness. And that can be smiling at someone and meaning it, like a genuine smile. That can be holding a door, although we're not leaving our houses as much. So, you know, that can be complimenting someone on a Zoom call. That can be refraining from arguing over politics on social media. You know, there are so many ways that I can be kind in my day to day life. So, I don't have to like start a fundraiser. I don't have to donate a kidney. You know, those are things that certainly are kind gestures, but in my day to day life, I find that if I just look for opportunities to be kind, they're there every single day,

**Pete Kenworthy**

But I would think this also is a practice of kindness. Like I can't lower my blood pressure by being kind one time, one day, right?

**Dr. Marcie Hall**

Right.

**Pete Kenworthy**

This is, this is something that it impacts your body, scientifically, for lack of a better word, from a long period of this practice, right?

**Dr. Marcie Hall**

So, yes and no. So, short term studies where you're given, let's say \$20 and told to spend this \$20 on yourself or someone else by the end of the day. You have one day to spend this money. So, people who spend their \$20 on themselves experience some increase in satisfaction and happiness. But those who spend their \$20 on someone else experience significantly more satisfaction and happiness. So, you know, it doesn't take a long time. But you're right, that it is a habit, and it's a practice. And so, every day when you make a small choice to do something kind, it kind of builds that muscle. And so, it becomes more reflexive the more you do it. So, it is something that you can teach yourself to do. You can teach others to do. You can keep a journal. And, you know, some people notice that if they're aware of kindness, they see it more. They realize like this has been going on the whole time. I just didn't notice it.

So, once you become aware, it's sort of that old saying, like, your energy goes where your attention flows. Or your energy flows where your attention goes. Wherever you're putting your energy, that's what going to notice. So, if you're constantly focusing on the uncertainty around schools opening, or the financial crisis, or, you know, et cetera, et cetera, all the different things in our lives, disparities in healthcare. I could list a whole bunch of things. If you're only focusing on those things, that's where your energy is going. So, if you purposely acknowledge those things exist and look for opportunities in your day to day life where you can extend kindness, you will notice that it gets easier and easier to see these opportunities and to act on them. And again, it doesn't take much. You know, it's just a small gesture, but the more you do it, the more you build that muscle.

**Macie Jepson**

You know, Doctor, you touched on this already, that we're living in stressful times. In fact, I wanted to ask you about that. The Kaiser Family Foundation released a tracking poll that shows for the first time, a majority of American adults, 53% in fact, believe that the COVID pandemic is taking a toll on their mental health. So, can kindness actually help offset this?

**Dr. Marcie Hall**

A hundred percent. So.

**Pete Kenworthy**

I was hoping that would be your answer.

**Dr. Marcie Hall**

What we know is that when we are feeling stressed, anxious, worried, fretting, we know that we're releasing cortisol. That's the stress hormone that we talked about earlier, and that is the appropriate response for our body. But if we have too much of it, it's not helpful at all. And it just actually ends up wearing down our immune system. It ends up causing us to age more quickly and hold on to that belly fat we were talking about earlier. So, cortisol is not something you want floating around in your body all the time. So, it's even more important now than ever to look for simple, free, easy strategies to decrease your cortisol levels and increase your positive neurotransmitters, including serotonin, oxytocin and the endorphins that we talked about earlier. So, there's never been a better time to decide to adopt these practices.

So, leaving little reminders for yourself. You know, interrupt anxiety with gratitude, something as simple as that. You can catch yourself when you're starting to get stressed, and you can catch yourself. And you can remember, I have control over the neurotransmitters my brain is essentially bathing itself in. And I want my brain to be bathing itself in the neurotransmitters, the chemicals that help with my health and the health of my community. So, it's really important to be intentional about selecting, you know, kind of where you put your energy, especially right now, more than ever.

### **Pete Kenworthy**

Man. It's hard though, right? I mean, it's really hard. Like we're all stressed. We get mad at our kids, fight with our spouses, right? And you're saying just flip a switch and be nice. Like it's not, it's not that easy, right?

### **Dr. Marcie Hall**

Exactly.

### **Macie Jepson**

Or just to be grateful because I've experienced that myself. Waking up in the middle of the night at times during this pandemic and feeling panicked inside and then saying, you know what? Instead, I'm just going to sit here and... yeah, I'm a faithful person, so I'm just going to tell you...you know, have a little conversation with God about what's good in my life, and it does make a difference. I'm not kidding. Right here, I can give an example.

### **Dr. Marcie Hall**

Absolutely, absolutely. You notice, if you're paying attention, you notice that your body feels different after you start to change where you're putting the focus of your energy. So, it's not easy, but nothing worthwhile really is. And so, this is again, building the habit and building your muscle, your kindness muscle. So, when you're yelling at your kids, when you're stressed, when you're frustrated, that's the exact right time to step away. And it sounds really silly, but you literally want to count your blessings, like count your, count the things, label the things, notice the things: a tree, a cloud, fresh air, you know, whatever, whatever it is that's around you. You know, you're dry, you're safe, you're warm, you're, you know, simple, as simple as that. Your, your belly is full. Who knows? But if you just literally begin to pay attention to the things in your life that you're grateful for, you can immediately change the neurotransmitter activity in your brain.

### **Macie Jepson**

So, you've touched a little bit on what it does for us to be the receiver of kindness. You know, and there's that old adage, it's better to give than to receive. I want to talk a little bit more about receiving and the benefits of that.

### **Dr. Marcie Hall**

Absolutely. So, that is an old adage, and that was long before we had any scientific evidence. But they were right, because as the receiver of kindness, you do get a boost in those same neurotransmitters. You just don't get as much of a boost. So, selfishly it is better to be the giver because you get more of a boost, but the receiver certainly gets a boost as well. So, the receiver of kindness experiences the feeling of being seen, acknowledged, appreciated, valued, and then that helps with their self-esteem. It also, again, secretes the same neurotransmitters. So, oxytocin, for example, will increase their feelings of connectedness with others. And that's what inspires the reciprocal or sort of pay it forward type mentality. An example of that, which you probably all have heard is, you know, the mom who's in the drive-through getting dinner for herself and her daughter and pulls up to the window, ready to pay, when she's told by the employee, the person ahead of you has actually already paid for your meal. And she experiences a feeling of warmth, a feeling of connected, appreciated, valued. It's a very positive experience. And in the scenario that I hear, it's sort of like almost without fail, that person is then inspired to turn around, make sure it's not a school bus full of children, perhaps, or a football team and say, I'd like to pay for their meal. And so, then the employees or whoever's inside the restaurant is witnessing this, and the driver receives her food and pays for the person behind them. And this can go on for 45 minutes, an hour, usually until there's a break in customers, or there is a school bus full of children where nobody's quite ready to take that on.

However, just hearing about this story. So, some of your listeners or you guys, as you're hearing about this story, you might've noticed a very, you know, small, but perhaps noticeable feeling of warmth or connectedness, or just kind of a little bit more of an urge to be part of something like that. And that's what happens in the receiver and even in the person witnessing the acts of kindness. That's, what's really incredible is that you don't even have to be involved as the giver or the receiver. So, the people in the restaurant who worked there, who were witnessing this also got the boost. Their neurotransmitters bumped up as do, you know, people even hearing the story later. So, it's pretty incredible that you can, you know, experience as the giver the most, as the receiver still gets a benefit, and the observer still gets a benefit. So, it's pretty incredible that it can have that, that effect on people. It is contagious.

### **Pete Kenworthy**

I mean, it sounds really basic, right? Be kind. Right? The two simple words, but Holy Cow, it's had this huge impact we never would have even thought about. I mean, it's amazing.

### **Dr. Marcie Hall**

It really is. And I think that it's so easily overlooked because we're so used to seeing it on teenagers' water bottles and on, you know, embroidered on a pillow. So, it just becomes this sort of like whatever, whatever Pollyanna, stupid, naïve, sunshine and rainbows, like just stop already, because you must not know, you know, how hard life really is. But then you realize some of the kindest people are sometimes those who have been through the most challenging or difficult or dark times, and they have come to understand that yeah, life can be really hard. There's a lot of uncertainty.

There's a lot of stress and the way to make ourselves OK in such an environment is to kind of be as protective of ourselves and our community as we possibly can. And a really easy way to do that is through kindness.

### **Macie Jepson**

It's one of the few things in life that we can actually control.

### **Dr. Marcie Hall**

We can absolutely control it. And it's very teachable. You can help your children. You can help your colleagues. You can help your family members to get that benefit.

### **Pete Kenworthy**

So, before we wrap up here, the opposite of kindness is probably important here, too, right? And I wonder what being mean does to your body, too, and from the same perspective, right? Giving the meanness, receiving the meanness. I'm guessing there are some things that happen to your body there, too, right?

### **Dr. Marcie Hall**

So, absolutely. And it's tricky because when we see and engage in some critical, cruel exchanges, we can get that burst of cortisol, which is a bit like, you know, it again, it's for fight or flight. So, it almost feels like a little bit of energy. It's like a boost of like, oh, I'm, I'm fired up. I'm ready to go. I'm ready to argue. I'm ready to, you know, honk my horn, scream at someone in traffic. And it's so easy to get really angry really quickly. And what we notice is that that does kind of get more attention on social media platforms. I think the recent study suggested there's like 17 to one, the ratio of like bad things to good. And that kind of sells, because not, nobody's going to buy a newspaper that's all about like, look how kind my neighbor was to me. That's just not as riveting as some of these more upsetting stories. But we can almost, if you pay attention, you can notice in yourself how fired up you can get and how angry and how worked up. But then if you say to yourself, I'm going to switch the narrative.

I'm going to tell myself that the reason I'm mad in traffic is because I'm worried I'm going to be late for my spouse, for my appointment, for my couch date with Netflix. I'm in the middle of binge watching something, and I'm upset because I'm now missing valuable time. So, if you're kind of compassionate with yourself in traffic, and you say something along the lines of like, this is really annoying, you want to validate your own experience, and at the same time it's going to be OK, then it becomes easier to, yes, maybe let that person merge ahead of you who probably should have merged long ago. Yes, you're right about that. Like validating, like, yeah, they screwed up, but I'm going to let them merge. I'm going to slow down my rage, and I'm going to focus again on literally counting the things I'm grateful for. I have a water bottle or a cup of coffee next to me. I can look at the blue sky while I'm sitting here waiting. You can look for something that will help you calm your brain and decrease your cortisol.

The same if you're online, like if you might want to have fun and be mean and jab and criticize online, but it's really short-lived and superficial. And as soon as you get it out there, you might feel like, oh, OK, now what? So, if you switch that narrative and you decide, all right, I'm not going to engage, there's a calming that kind of happens. You kind of let go of that rage. So, you give up that little burst of maybe like I'm ready to fight kind of energy in favor of like, I gotta just live and let live. And then there's a calmness that can kind of come over you. The same in a shopping line, if you're waiting, and if we now know how relevant kindness is from a physiological standpoint, we're going to want to take every opportunity we can find to be kind. So, even though



it's tempting and, yes, like those scary, upsetting, dark stories have a role, perhaps, you want to devote less of your energy to those and more of your energy looking for opportunities to be kind.

**Pete Kenworthy**

Dr. Hall. Thank you so much for your time and teaching us about being kind.

**Dr. Marcie Hall**

It's my pleasure. Thanks so much for having me.

**Pete Kenworthy**

Yeah, it was so great. Remember, you can find and subscribe to this podcast on iTunes, Google Play, Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts. Search University Hospitals or Healthy@UH, depending on where you subscribe.

**Macie Jepson**

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