

Kindness & Health

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Kindness can bring a sense of richness and fulfilment to our lives, and as a bonus, promote good health and longevity. Paul Pearsall, a Ph.D. in psychology living in Hawaii, writes in his book *The Pleasure Prescription* (Hunter House, 1996) "Modern research shows one of the most pleasurable of all human acts is also one of the healthiest things you can do for yourself and for others. Gentle, caring selflessness results in significant health benefits."

In the book *Meaning & Medicine*, (Bantam Books, 1991) author Dr Larry Dossey tells us, "Altruism behaves like a miracle drug, and a strange one at that. It has beneficial effects on the person doing the helping - the helper's high; it benefits the person to whom the help is directed; and it can stimulate healthy responses in persons at a distance who may view it only obliquely."

There have been a number of studies undertaken which demonstrate the positive effects of kindness on health (both psychological and physiological). Further studies are under way, and several books have been published on the beneficial effects of kindness. Studies undertaken since 1988 are described in detail in *The Healing Power of Doing Good* (Fawcett Columbine, 1991) written by Allan Luks and Peggy Payne. Luks often noticed feelings of pleasure and well being while involved in helping others. Initially thinking it was something he alone experienced, he began to hear from others about the pleasurable feelings associated with helping. This prompted him to investigate further into "this intriguing phenomenon that seemed to have almost magical effects".

The benefits mentioned in his book are as follows:

- A more optimistic and happier outlook on life
- A heightened sense of well being
- A sense of exhilaration and euphoria
- An increase in energy
- A feeling of being healthy
- Decreased feelings of loneliness, depression and helplessness
- A sense of connectedness with others
- A greater sense of calmness and relaxation
- Increased longevity
- Better weight control
- An improvement in insomnia
- A stronger immune system
- A reduction in pain
- Increased body warmth
- A healthier cardiovascular system (reduction of high blood pressure, improved circulation, reduced coronary disease)
- A reduction of excessive stomach acid
- A decrease of oxygen requirement
- Relief from arthritis and asthma
- Speedier recovery from surgery
- Reduced cancer activity

The above list would put a snake oil salesman to shame, yet the effects have been proven many times over. Pearsall was not exaggerating when he referred to the effects of kindness as having "immense immune and healing benefits".

One of the participants in Luks's survey stated the following: "Some months ago I was so stressed out that I could barely get four hours sleep at night, and I had all sorts of aches and pains. I had even tried antidepressant and anti-anxiety drugs, but to no avail. I then found out first hand that it is love that truly heals. When I do nice things for others, I definitely feel a physical response. For me it is mostly a relaxation of muscles that I hadn't even realised had been tensed. I can now sleep well at night, and most of my aches and pains have disappeared."

People who are aware of the beneficial effects of kindness use it to keep their health conditions under control. Kindness is being utilised to keep high blood pressure in check, to banish headaches, relieve back pain, and subdue the pain of lupus and arthritis, while others use it to cure a case of the blues. Why would helping others have such beneficial effects? Partly because helping takes our mind off our problems (i.e. reduces stress) and gets us thinking about someone else.

Dr Herbert Benson, a Harvard cardiologist who has been involved in scientific research for over 30 years (he

is also an author, his most well known book being *The Relaxation Response*), tells us that when we help others it allows us to "forget one's self". Another reason is that when we carry out an act of kindness, our body rewards us by creating a "feel good" sensation, which boosts self esteem and well being. This experience has been termed the "helper's high". The response is triggered when the body manufactures chemicals called endorphins. These endorphins are naturally occurring morphine-like substances that create a feeling of bliss within us. In addition to creating a feel good experience, they also help to reduce the intensity of any pain messages being sent to the brain.

We must assume that one of our basic purposes on planet Earth is to be kind. Why else would our body reward us every time we help someone? As Pearsall tells us, "In concrete terms, there seems to be a biological reward for doing the right thing".

It is not necessary to carry out major acts of kindness to gain the health benefit. In fact it has been found that brief, small, regular acts of kindness lead to the highest levels of well being. It has also been found that such small, pleasurable experiences can more than offset any negative health effects brought about by life's stressful events, regardless of their magnitude. This will be good news to those of us who worry about the ramifications of the day to day negative conflicts in our lives. If we happily punctuate our day with small acts of kindness, our health will be in good shape!

Paul Pearsall's warning about the lack of joy in our lives was mentioned earlier. What is the cause of this lack of joy? According to Pearsall it is the inability to control our destiny and the feeling of vulnerability that this brings, as well as an inability to realise that our physical ills and social ills are related. What is the answer? To reconnect with ourselves, the earth, and those around us.

When you choose to become a kinder person, you are not only improving the well being and health of yourself and those you come into contact with. Your kindness has a ripple effect. It has the magical ability of causing even those who have witnessed the act to spontaneously feel good. When you make the decision to be a kinder person, you are effectively bringing about positive social change.

As previously indicated, the act of giving, or being of service, showing kindness, altruism, or any of the other names by which it is known, has the ability to achieve powerful health benefits. The beneficial effects from kind acts come from the bonding to a fellow human being, no matter how fleeting that contact may be. However, care needs to be taken not to expect some form of outcome from the kind act, otherwise the benefits to the given will be diminished or lost completely. If an outcome is not expected, there will be no disappointment. For instance, if I were to let a car in from a side street, expecting the driver to acknowledge my kind act, and it didn't happen, it could conceivably provoke rage if I were that way inclined. If I am not expecting a positive reaction, and I get one, then that's a bonus. When I expect others to play by my rules, I'm setting myself up for disappointment.

Kindness is not only something that has positive benefits for ourselves, it is something that has a positive effect on the community. Allan Luks states, "The new knowledge about [the beneficial effects of] helping others holds the power to affect not only the health of the individual, but the health of our entire, tension-ridden society".

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