

Wednesday Adams

When I was a little girl, my family had a wood stove. I used to love watching my mother build fires on cold winter days. Each morning she cut the wood to bring inside and then built up little teepees of kindling, carefully filling them with paper and tree sap. Striking a match, the whole thing lit up in beautiful warmth giving flames. I see now that kindness works in a similar way. All it takes is a little spark to begin spreading light and warmth into the world. And science agrees with me.

Jamil Zaki, a professor of psychology at Harvard, discovered that kindness is contagious. In a study he conducted, he saw that when someone carries out a single act of Kindness, at least 3 people benefit: the person doing the act, the person receiving, and anyone who witnesses the act. The witness or witnesses are more likely to be kind to others and pay kindness forward after seeing someone else do a good deed. And from that one good deed can come many, just like the little spark in my mother's wood stove, spreading the warmth of kindness into the world.

Today, I am here to help you reimagine what kindness is, and also help you envision new ways that you can kindle the fires of kindness in your everyday lives, and into our world.

Being kind doesn't just mean being good or having high moral standards. While ethics do play a role in being kind, they are not the driving force behind it. Kindness is actually a key part of our biology, and also makes us healthy. A study conducted at Dartmouth College found that kindness stimulates the production of serotonin and oxytocin in our brains, which are the key endorphins that make us happy and compassionate. At the same time these endorphins decrease the level of cortisol, a stress chemical, in our bodies.

What that all means is that when we are compassionate and giving, little chemical messages travel through our neural pathways and tell our brain to be happy, and not worry. When our bodies have less cortisol, and more serotonin and oxytocin, we see a decrease in the symptoms of depression and anxiety. We also see stronger immune systems, lower blood pressure, healthier hearts, and longer lifespans.

These are incredible things, and it is amazing that something as simple as being kind can make us so much happier and healthier. Especially when we consider how hard many of us work to obtain those things through lifestyle changes including: diets, medications, and self help books. While those things can be important, the answer to living a better life is simple, and somehow we all missed it. All we have to do is be kind.

I like to envision kindness in everyone as little warm coals that live inside your chest. They spread their warmth throughout your body whenever you do something good. Sometimes your coals can feel like they're flickering out. Like you can't be happy or kind to anyone, including yourself. But it is important to know your coals will never really be extinguished, they just dimen sometimes; however, one small act of kindness can get them to a full glow again.

Kindness can be something as simple as holding the door for the person behind you, or telling someone you appreciate them. The power of kindness is not measured by the size of the action, but by the action itself.

As well as being good to others, it is important to be kind to yourself. It doesn't make you a narcissist to love yourself, especially when we bear in mind that it's very hard to give warmth and light to others if you do not have any of it to give.

So when you leave here today, remember these three key components to building the fire of kindness.

1. Kindness lives within us all, and our biology is the spark that lights our fire.
2. Kindness is contagious, and goodness is the paper that allows our fire to spread.
3. If you ever feel like your fire is dying down, all it takes is one act of Kindness to rekindle it.

And with that in mind, I am leaving it in each and every one of your capable hands to spread warmth and kindness in our world. Remember, it only takes a spark to get the fire going, so what are we waiting for?

Thank You.