

# **Acts of Kindness**

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Acts of kindness..... I strongly suspect that, having chosen this topic, I am in the position of “preaching to the choir” as we explore acts of kindness.

Many, if not all of you, are demonstrating random and deliberate acts of kindness on an on-going basis.

This program will hopefully give you recognition for your efforts as well as outline how others are giving of themselves each day.

Love, as explored in a previous UUFR service, is more readily understood if we see it as a verb (to love) rather than as a noun. When love is a verb, it implies action, such as acts of kindness. When love is seen as a noun, it becomes something that can overwhelm us or something that we fall into, or out of!

The growth of love requires on-going actions, and these actions require empathy, which is the ability to identify with the feelings of another.

## The decline of empathy and civility

However, some social scientists, such as Sarah Konrath, research professor at the University of Michigan, found that empathy — her measures were based on the self-reporting of college freshman students — has been declining over the past thirty years. She also found that

narcissism — or an inflated sense of self-importance and self-centeredness — has significantly increased from the early 1980s to the present.

It is not difficult to recognize the very public signs of this erosion of empathy, from the countless mud-slinging political commercials leading up to the current elections to the increasing polarity and tensions among nations as well as segments of our own society because of race, sexual orientation, gender, religion, disability, or other factors.

This erosion of common courtesy or civility in modern life should be a concern for all of us, because lack of respect for others, bullying behavior and plain old bad manners have caused many people to tune out, turn off and turn away from government and politics. They are disgusted by politicians who are at each other's throats and have forgotten why they are there in the first place. Indeed, bullying has become a much more common and public political weapon in the last few years.

Since kids model their behavior on what they see, it's hard to expect children and teens to stop bullying each other when adults are leading by example.

Social scientists have also discovered that hostile behaviors encourage further hostile behaviors. However, the good news is that acts of kindness also produce an increase in further acts of kindness, and there are countless day-to-day situations that provide us with opportunities to perform acts of kindness.

## An example of an act of kindness

In June 2015, Kayla Lane, a waitress at a local restaurant in Fort Worth, Texas had a chance encounter with a couple, Shaun and Debbie Riddle, who had recently suffered a tragic loss. Because the couple were regulars at the restaurant where Kayla worked, she noticed one afternoon that their child, who had previously accompanied them on a number of visits, was absent.

It was Kayla's ability to remember friendly faces and form connections with strangers that lead her to do what she did next. Upon finding out that the Riddle's baby girl had passed away weeks earlier, Kayla decided to pay off the couple's bill for them, leaving them a kind note in its place, that read,

*"Your ticket has been paid for. We are terribly sorry for your loss. God Bless."*

"I was just shocked," Debbie told a news outlet, explaining that Kayla had covered up her own act of kindness by humbly making it seem as if the restaurant had footed the bill. In reality, the money came from Kayla's own pocket.

This small gesture meant more than Kayla could have known. The couple explained: "Kayla is a college student, she's only 21, and she's putting herself through school. It's just amazing, and I was just so touched and so moved that a complete stranger remembered us and our baby, much less took money out of her own pocket – and she didn't want any recognition."

## Random and deliberate acts of kindness.

Most of us can create random acts of caring, such as giving up your place in line or seat on a bus, or buying a small gift for a loved one or stranger. Random acts of kindness are often spur of the moment acts that can make someone's day and lift their spirit.

Deliberate acts of kindness not only require kindness, but often require careful planning, work, and commitment. They can even save the life of someone who is about ready to give up. Examples of deliberate acts of kindness include providing care for someone in hospice care or becoming an organ donor – the ultimate contribution that one human can make to another.

Both random acts and deliberate acts of kindness serve a great purpose, and both kinds of acts contribute to a better world.

For example, a young woman said: "I am a cancer survivor. I am going in for my annual ultra sound but have crocheted a small afghan to give to someone when I am there. I don't know who yet, but I will be able to tell who needs it by looking in the waiting room. This is a deliberate act of kindness yet random in who will receive the gift."

## Benefits of acts of kindness

People who perform acts of kindness generally agree that doing a kind deed for someone else makes them “feel good.” But apart from sheer niceness, why should people be encouraged to commit acts of kindness? Are there any other concrete benefits that would motivate more people to become kinder?

The answer is an overwhelming “yes!” A number of scientific studies show that acts of kindness result in significant health benefits, both physical and mental, for those who perform them.

One of the most compelling studies of altruism, which is defined as the unselfish concern for the welfare of others, was performed by Allan Luks and documented in his 1991 book, *The Healing Power of Doing Good*. Luks is the former executive director of the Institute for the Advancement of Health and executive director of Big Brothers/Big Sisters of New York City.

He surveyed over 3,000 volunteers about how they felt when they did a kind act, and found that those who helped others had better health.

"Helping contributes to the maintenance of good health, and it can diminish the effect of diseases and disorders both serious and minor, psychological and physical," Luks said.

Among the most significant of Luks' findings was a "helper's high" that 95 percent of the volunteers reported feeling. The "helper's high" reduced stress and released endorphins, the body's natural painkillers. After the high

subsided, volunteers reported feeling an extended period of improved emotional well-being.

Other findings of Luks' study included that people, who regularly helped others:

- Experienced less depression, hostility, isolation and helplessness
- Felt greater joy, self-worth, emotional resilience and optimism
- Reported a decrease in their intensity of physical pain

### Other ways of expressing acts of kindness

Many people tend to think of giving only in terms of grand gestures. They miss the simple openings of the heart that can be practiced anywhere with almost anyone.

We can say hello to someone everybody ignores. We can offer to help a neighbor. We can buy a bouquet of flowers and take it to a nursing home, or spend an extra few minutes talking to someone who needs our time.

We can participate in blood drives and donate blood.

We can take money out of our pocket and give it to someone on the street. No waiting for thanks ...just give, smile, and walk away.

We can, when the opportunity arises, compliment someone (a friend or stranger) on the abilities or behavior of their child.

For example, “A young mother spoke about how moved she was, after receiving a note praising her parenting skills from a stranger on a commuter train. While traveling with her son, she made him sit on her lap to make room for another passenger. As she got off the train, a man slipped her the message. The note, in capital letters, read: "You are a credit to your generation, polite and teaching the little boy good manners. I have an adult daughter your age. I hope, when she has children, she will be as good a mother as you are.”

Thank you and now, let’s hear from you about your experiences with giving or receiving acts of kindness.