

INSIGHT



Ordinary Acts of Extraordinary Importance

Unlike the headlines that shout out bad news and horrific happenings, kindness often reveals itself quietly.

A mother receives a gift of much-needed food and immediately shares it with another hungry family. An elderly man distributes sandwiches every evening to the homeless in his neighborhood park. An investment executive reads to children at an orphanage during his lunch hour.

The people doing the good work, true everyday leaders, will likely tell you, "It's no big deal. I'm just doing my life."

And it's true. Those who practice kindness are not saints, not perfect people. They come from all races, ages, genders, spiritual beliefs, political persuasions and lifestyles.

They are ordinary people doing acts of extraordinary importance.

What Kathleen A. Brehony discovered in writing her book, *Ordinary Grace*, is that for these people, acts of kindness lead to the kind of meaning and fulfillment that makes life worth living. In other words, we make a life by what we give.

"We all make decisions about what we will emphasize as we live our lives," Brehony says. "Whether we 'tune in' and open our hearts to ordinary grace or not is a personal choice."

The grace Brehony refers to encompasses compassion, altruism and empathy—in essence, all forms of loving-kindness, or, acting with the goal of benefiting another. These are values that most of us share. In emergencies, such as recent fires and hurricanes, kindness is especially prevalent.

But many people fail to bring their everyday actions into accord with their beliefs and values. We have the best of intentions, but are overwhelmed by the demands of everyday life.

What makes kindness come alive and enrich the lives of both giver and receiver is action. Not just caring, but courageously acting based on that caring. Kindness in action.

Kindness in action is not just about doing good work, but also about recognizing the inherent goodness in every human being. It's about understanding that despite the outer trappings—income level, social standings, education,

politics—we all want the same essential things: our basic survival needs met, dignity, a good life for our children and meaningful connection with other humans.

We all have dozens of opportunities a day to either pass along a spark of kindness or to pass up the opportunity, leaving the world a bit older and wearier. And don't forget about kindness to yourself. Here are six ways to make a difference in your life and others' by living kindness in action.

Discover what you love. What's important in your life? What's missing? Joy in your own life always spills over to others.

Be prepared for pain as well as joy. It can hurt to care. But acting on that care, participating in transforming the suffering, is nurturing.

Simplify and scale down. Where in our lives is there time for compassion to enter? Learn to say no to that which is not meaningful to you.

Put belief into action. Virtues such as kindness, generosity and thoughtfulness are not intended to be lofty ideals but rather modes of behavior.

Find grace in small things. Writer Alice Walker suggests, "We have to regain our belief in the power of what is small."

Model good behavior. Children learn mostly by what they see and hear. *

"Unless our insights result in some practical action, they are not useful at all. With compassion, one needs to be engaged, involved." —Dalai Lama

10 Fears that Get in the Way of a Fulfilling Life

Making decisions, taking actions, asking for what we want—these are all necessary to move forward and create lives of meaning and fulfillment. But fears often become barriers that keep us from these lives. Don't hesitate to call if these 10 fears are getting in your way.

- 1. Fear of embarrassment.** Making mistakes publicly is awful only when we let ourselves feel ashamed.
- 2. Fear of being judged.** Needing approval can keep us from going after dreams and goals.
- 3. Fear of rejection.** Rejection just means that someone else has a different opinion.
- 4. Fear of emotional pain.** Rather than incapacitate us, painful feelings can sharpen our sense of joy and gratitude.
- 5. Fear of being alone/abandoned.** A strong sense of what we can offer the world reduces this fear.
- 6. Fear of failure.** Born of the notion that it's not OK to fail. But not failing means you're not growing.
- 7. Fear of success.** More responsibility, more attention, pressure to perform can be frightening when we don't believe in ourselves.
- 8. Fear of the unknown.** The unknown can be exciting and vast if we shift our fear to curiosity.
- 9. Fear of expressing feelings.** An authentic life means being willing to express our true feelings to our loved ones, colleagues, adversaries—even ourselves.
- 10. Fear of intimacy.** Emotional intimacy—really being seen by another—can be as scary as sexual intimacy. *

A Letter From

Cheie R. Weiss



It can feel today that kindness has taken a hiatus in American life. We see daily examples of cruelty and disrespect on our televisions and in our newspapers.

But, as the front page article discusses, kindness and compassion come alive for us and enrich the lives of both giver and receiver—through action. Not just caring, but acting on that caring.

Action lies at the heart of the Top 10 list, as well. For without courageous action to move through our fears, those fears will hold us back from the fulfilling lives we want to create for ourselves.

One action to avoid, however, is the all-to-common act of shifting blame to others, when it is actually you who may need to grow and change. The quiz on this page will help you discover if this psychological “weapon” is hurting your relationships and holding you back from needed personal growth.

It can be difficult to acknowledge those areas in which we need to improve. But as the page 3 feature article explores, there is great value in learning to accept criticism and the notion that we make mistakes and are imperfect. In fact, the right kind of criticism may be just what we need to make important changes.

Personal growth needn't be dreary or difficult, however. The back page article discusses how moving your body—yes, the sheer joy of shaking your booty!—can be a vital and profound way to touch the center of your being.

If you'd like to talk about the issues raised in these articles, or any other issues in your life, don't hesitate to call.

Are You Using This Potent Psychological Weapon?

Shifting blame can become an all-purpose gadget in our toolbox of defenses that we reach for it without even thinking. It's an easy way of taking the spotlight off ourselves and shining it on others when things go wrong. Blame helps maintain our self-image and preserve a sense of dignity. It's less painful than admitting your own failings, and it can be a potent psychological weapon. Basically, blame lets us off the hook. Take this quiz to see whether you're shifting blame. The alternative is not necessarily to blame yourself, but to acknowledge areas of needed personal growth.



True False

- 1. If it weren't for _____ (fill in the blank), I'd be a success.
- 2. I would be more punctual, except my carpool is always late (or my spouse doesn't have breakfast ready on time, or my son never puts the car keys where they're supposed to go, or...).
- 3. I can't help it if I am the way I am. My childhood was pretty rotten.
- 4. I've been known to put off projects, but it's because I don't have what I need. For example: "I would have had that report for you today if my assistant had given me the numbers I needed."
- 5. I'd be a better dad/mom if only my boss didn't demand so much of my time.
- 6. My children always have an excuse. I hear "It's not my fault" from them all the time.
- 7. If I trip or stumble, my reaction is usually something like, "What idiot left that brick here for me to trip over?"
- 8. I have used the phrase "How could you do this to me?"
- 9. If I'm angry at someone, I usually start off my sentence with "You make me so angry!"
- 10. It seems I'm always getting stuck in someone else's messes.
- 11. When something goes wrong in the house or at work, I immediately look for whose fault it is.
- 12. When others don't act the way I would, I perceive them as being wrong...and might just let them know it!

Blame masks the true nature of problems. As long as someone or something else is responsible for our feelings or failures, we don't have to do anything. Blaming others holds us in the past and keeps us from moving forward toward growth.

*Using blame makes us forget we have power over our own lives and that we're responsible for ourselves. When we stop expecting someone else to take care of us or do what needs to be done, then we have the power to do what we want and need to do. If you would like to look at ways you play the "blame game," don't hesitate to call. **

It's OK to *Not* Be Perfect: The Value of Opening Up to Criticism

Compliments feel nice to receive, even if we sometimes deflect. Suggestions might feel less nice, even a little awkward if you read too much into them.

But criticism—woah, baby!—criticism can feel downright threatening. We want to close the door and hang up the “closed” sign. After all, who wants to hear the sentences that begin with, “You want to know what your problem is?” or “If only you would change (fill in the blank) about yourself?”



Few people learn how to accept (or give) criticism gracefully as they are growing up. Many may have been criticized harshly or told things for their “own good” that were hurtful rather than helpful. We learn to dread anything that seems judgmental or critical.

Yet, if we can learn to truly listen to criticism about ourselves, we open the door to possibility. Learning to accept and use criticism can be one of the most constructive and profound tools to change ourselves and improve our relationships with others. Not only can we learn more about who we are and how others see us, but we may also learn that it’s okay not to be perfect. And, as a bonus, we may learn that people will love us anyway, warts and all.

Criticism as a Powerful Tool for Growth

Bernie Siegel, author and physician writes that criticism is an opportunity to become a better person. “When you feel inadequate or imperfect, criticism is threatening and makes you feel that you have to defend yourself. When you are secure—not perfect, but secure—you can listen to the criticism and consider its value.”

Byron Katie, author of *Loving What Is*, calls criticism “a powerful tool for self-realization and growth.” She suggests that when we are criticized for being wrong, unkind, uncaring, etc., we should ask ourselves if the criticism is true. If we can accept the truth without stress or pain, we free ourselves from trying to hide who we are from others. We know our faults and we accept them and, therefore, criticism from others cannot hurt us. “When you are genuinely humble, there is no place for criticism to stick,” she writes.

Givers of the Most Valuable Criticism

Parents are often among the most criticized group of people. Their parenting choices are targeted by relatives, other parents, strangers and parenting “experts.” And when their children are old enough to speak, they join in the chorus!

But of all the voices, it may be our children who offer us the most valuable criticism because they see us at our most vulnerable and unguarded. Children—especially teens—will tell us exactly what they think, in unadorned, sometimes painfully honest, language.

If we are able as parents to drop our authority roles and our belief that we know better because we are older/wiser/better, we can learn some awe-inspiring truths about ourselves. (And yes, it will hurt at times!) By doing this, we also model the art of accepting criticism—a valuable skill for our children as they grow up.

Finding the Truth in Criticism

Don Powell, Ph.D, of the American Institute for Preventive Medicine writes that sometimes criticism—the right kind of criticism—is just what we need to make important changes. In an AIPM handbook, Dr. Powell outlines the following questions to ask yourself when working with criticism:

- Does the criticism seem reasonable? Is there some truth to what was said? (Perhaps you should pay attention to the remark.)
- Have I been criticized by other people on the same issue? (If so, maybe it warrants attention.)
- Does the person making the critical remark know what he or she is talking about? (If he or she is a self-appointed critic-at-large, ignore the remark.)
- Was the remark really directed at me, or was the critic venting general frustration, anger, or bitterness at something over which I have no control? (If criticism stems from general dissatisfaction, let it slide.)
- Is the criticism based on a difference of opinion? (If so, don’t overreact.)



Once you decide that there is some truth to the criticism, you are on the path to taking positive steps to make changes in your behavior or outlook. Being able to hear and absorb criticism without anger or defensiveness helps make the path that much smoother. *

Using Movement to Explore (and Express) Your Inner Life

So many of us have negative connotations of the words “exercise” and “dance” and “physical education.” They’re dreary or loaded.

But what happens when we replace those terms with the sheer joy and the simple pleasure of moving your body. No matter your size, your shape, the flesh that jiggles, the bones that stick out, the maleness or femaleness of your contour—you will find in your moving body an expression of your deepest desires, your visions, your dreams, your one true voice that is inside you always. Just try it.

When we “move to learn,” rather than “learn to move,” we enter unknown inner territory. We begin to discover aspects of ourselves and our lives from fresh and refreshing perspectives. The personal history stored in our body becomes accessible for examination and dialogue.

“Nothing is more revealing than movement,” said pioneering modern dancer Martha Graham.

Graham understood the body as

a source of insight into some of the core issues of one’s life—a source of knowledge and transformation, a pathway to awareness. If given half an opportunity, the body will offer perspectives and ideas never before imagined by the intellect.

The value of movement in giving expression to one’s inner life traces back to earliest human history, when disease was seen as a loss of soul and dance was an integral part of the healing process.

In many cultures today, dance and movement are still vital and profound ways to touch the center of one’s being. When we reduce our body’s movement to losing weight or burning calories or winning over someone else, we lose so much. We keep ourselves locked in a perfectionistic self-consciousness about our bodies. We stay strangers to ourselves.

So go ahead. Find a quiet, private space. Suspend self-criticism and your habitual directives to your body. Engage your curiosity, respect,

honesty and courage. The language of your body is one of your most powerful ways to communicate, so express it, don’t suppress it!

Now, move your body and listen to its magic.



Here

are some suggestions to help in the process:

- If it helps, move to music.
- Love the space you move through and

bless your body for taking you there.

• Think of the expressiveness in the curl of your toes, the crook of your finger, the bend of your knee, the thrust of your shoulder, the roll of your hips.

• Remember that your total commitment to your body and to your deepest self will transform you and those around you. *



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