

# The Ripple Effects of Kindness

*When we treat others with kindness, there is a ripple effect that is felt through the lives of countless people around the world.*

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It only takes a spark  
to get a fire going,  
and soon all those around  
will warm up to its glowing ....

That old song, called "Pass It On," used to be a popular one to end campouts and church retreats. Everyone would gather in a circle in the dark with an unlit candle, and as they sang the song, one candle would be illuminated. Then that candle would be touched to the wick of another, and the person holding that candle would pivot to the next, and so on, until every candle was lit and the darkness was driven away.

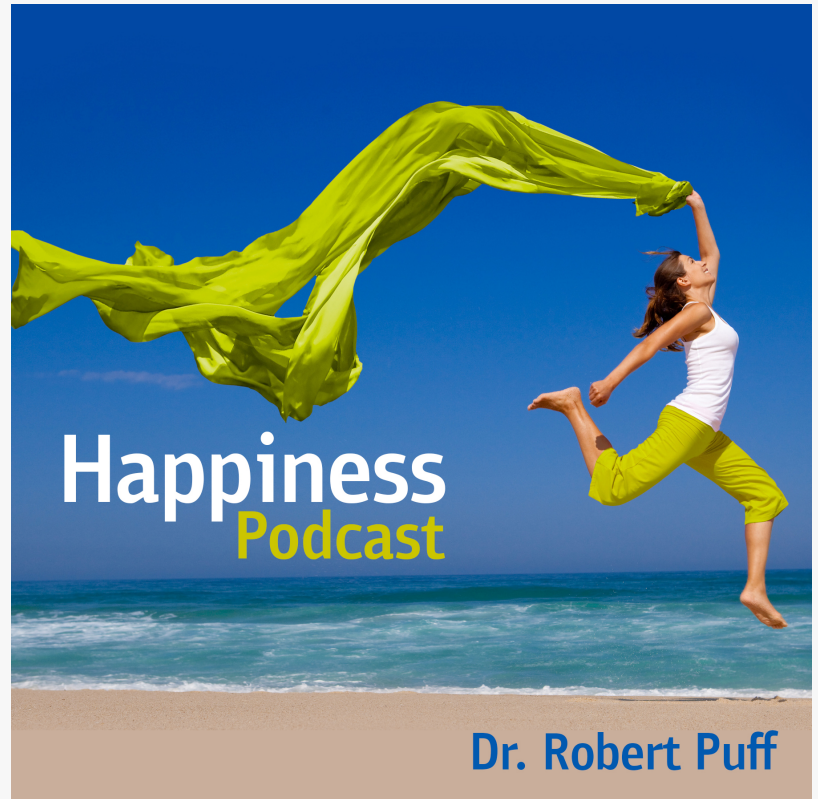
It only took a spark.

Lately, I've been thinking of [kindness](#) in that way — how it spreads from person to person, with the potential to light up the world.

Over the last 30 years, I've been listening to people's stories — the stories of their lives, and of what has caused them to be the way they are. Everyone has these stories of events from their past that caused them either unhappiness or [happiness](#).

One thing I've learned in all this time is that we affect one another, and the way we treat others matters.

There's no getting around the cruel fact that the actions of people we're raised with matter.



Happiness Podcast

Some parents are loving, supportive, and kind, but then there are those who are cruel or even abusive. The words of such parents can have a lasting impact, with statements like “I wish you’d never been born,” or “You’ll never amount to anything.” This can become part of a playlist that their children return to again and again throughout their lives, because it’s incredibly difficult to change to a different soundtrack when one is so embedded into our subconscious.

Cruel words are sadly common, but physical or even sexual cruelty are also enacted upon children, and the memories of these actions, too, can reverberate for years.

You may know someone who had a very challenging childhood growing up, and if you do, you have likely seen the ripple effects of that early trauma. These people may leave their childhood and their families in the past, but as adults they may move on to instigating abuse in their own relationships, or they may numb themselves with drugs and alcohol.

Even if they avoid physical abuse of themselves (through substances) or others (through violence), people who were raised in an atmosphere of unkindness may themselves resort to being unkind to the people in their lives — the people they love. What we see in these situations is a cycle of pain that moves from one generation to the next.

Something that has surprised me over the years is that I have known people who went through



Dr. Robert Puff



Kindness matters

incredibly difficult childhoods, and they have turned out beautifully. We might look at this outcome as being seemingly miraculous. How did they do it? How did they end the cycle of pain?

This is a topic I have explored with close attention for decades, and what I have found is that love makes its mark in people's lives. When people who have had challenging upbringings turn out helpful, loving, and kind, I believe we are seeing ripples of a loving presence that made its mark on their lives, perhaps outside of the home.

I really believe that no matter how challenging our young lives were, someone probably loved us unconditionally. Someone showed us unconditional kindness, even in the darkest of hours. It could be anyone. Are they angels? Are they beings that were sent to help us? Whatever they are, they're with all of us, and the spark of their lovingkindness passes on and on.

I've never found anyone who didn't have someone in their lives who showed them some kindness, some love, even when it seemed like everyone else in their lives was cruel to them.

Here's what I know about kindness: It has a ripple effect. The love of a single kind, angelic presence can issue from them in wave after wave after wave, washing over and through us and continuing on to touch those in our path. For some, even with the horrible things that are happening in their lives, they are able to take this kindness and turn it into something beautiful.

All of us have opportunities in our lives to be kind to others — to say something encouraging, to treat them in a friendly way, to show expressions of kindness toward them — and when we do this, we create a ripple of kindness that radiates in two directions: outward and inward.

The kindness that radiates outward toward others can help them to improve their lives by giving them hope, by helping them through difficult times, or by putting a smile on their face. We often do not know the effects of our kindness on others, but we can be sure that it makes a difference. It could be that someone goes home with a happier heart, and thus is more likely to share kindness with loved ones — perhaps with children.

And beyond eliciting a simple smile, our stopping and making time for kindness to others might pull them out of dark despair. It might help them when we don't realize that they're having a hard time. It could even spare a precious life from being ended through suicide. We don't know how far our ripples extend, but I believe they can go very far sometimes, and just by the mindset of love and care, we can help others to live an improved life.

Kindness is a source of hope for the hopeless. It opens the door to positive possibilities. When others are being kind to us and they really don't have to be, we take that in. We say, "Oh, maybe there is love, and maybe I can let that love in and even love myself." Even if we feel that we do not deserve kindness, we understand that someone else feels differently about us and our value and worth. Kindness loosens our bonds to let that love in, and as a result, we may begin to show

compassion toward our own stoutly beating heart.

The ripple effects of kindness affect the people we come in contact with and the people they encounter after they leave us, and there is every reason to expect that the beat goes on and on and on. “It only takes a spark,” as the song says. The more kindness we show, the more the world around us will become a much more beautiful place. There is so much negativity and darkness in our world, but our kindness can be a light.

I remember once going on a tour of a cave. There is a moment in most such tours where the guide turns out the lights, and there is no dark like that. It is a fact of physics that light can’t bend; it can travel only in a straight line. Once we’re in a cave like that, we’ve moved through narrow passages and around corners and up and down slopes, and there was no way for a ray of light to follow us there. That would be physically impossible.

If someone in the tour group happened to have a watch with a glowing dial or a lighted digital display, what a difference that would make! That light, imperceptible in the light of day, would be so bright in a dark cave because it’s the only source of light to be found. Kindness is like this. When we’re in our darkest places, the spark of the simplest friendly gesture can illuminate our lives and guide us on our way.

When the lights finally do come on in this part of the standard cave tour, what an experience that is. It is almost blinding. Maybe this would be considered low light under normal circumstances; maybe there’s hardly any light at all. But kindness shines when people are in despair or struggling, and we can help people navigate by our example.

For the people in our daily lives — our friends and our family members — we have an opportunity throughout the day to share our kindness with them. Where we might come home to them and tease them, kid them, or make fun of them, we can instead choose a loving word that can encourage and lift them. This is something we can do throughout the day, wherever we are.

I have often counseled couples were struggling in their relationship. The main thing I try to impart to them is the importance of a tender word. I encourage them to say something friendly to them throughout each day to give each other hope and help them to feel love. We experience love through kindness, in romantic relationships, but also in our daily lives. For example, in the workplace, if we are a supervisor with employees who report to us, we can correct them, but for every correction, we should give them dozens of words of encouragement, too.

Sometimes people choose to be unkind to us. When this happens, a good choice can be to walk away and put distance between ourselves and the ugliness. Another alternative? We can be kind back to the person who has chosen to treat us cruelly. We are never required to be giving to those who take from us, emotionally or otherwise, but it is an option we might want to try, and a potent one. Unlikely as it seems, kindness is one of the most important forces in the universe.

I mentioned that kindness can radiate outwards toward others, but it can also radiate inwards towards ourselves. When this happens, we open ourselves up to happiness.

The truth is, happiness is only possible through kindness. We are not going to find happiness in our hearts if we treat others with unkindness, because kindness is part of the journey toward happiness. We honestly do need to be kind toward others if we want to find peace in our lives.

Those people who are kind are much more likely to be happy in life. They don't have to look in the mirror and say, "I'm a cruel, unkind person." Instead they can say that even if people are treating them unkindly, they can be kind toward others.

It is really important that we understand the value of maintaining boundaries when we are dealing with cruel and sadistic people. Everyone needs kindness in their lives, but those who would choose to abuse you do not need their kindness to come from you. If someone is being cruel to you in your life right now, you should recognize that you have the right to get up and walk away — and if someone is being physically or sexually abusive, you must find a way to exit that situation the moment you can do so safely. There are resources to help, including the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-7233).

Beyond abuse, many of us find that the world is not a kind place, but even when we see others out to cause misery and unhappiness, we can choose to be that watch dial in the cave, or that circle of candles, lit one wick to the next until night starts to look like day. When we take the many opportunities we have to be kind throughout the day, we can feel the ripple effects of kindness inside of us, radiating through self-love.

There are many parts to living a happy life, but one of the main ones is kindness. I doubt you or I will ever meet a truly happy person who is unkind, because a person who is unkind will never find happiness. The ripple effects would be so damaging to themselves and to others in their lives.

You are reading this because you desire a life filled with happiness. Maybe we all want such a life, but you have taken steps to embrace happiness and to welcome it into your life. I have been talking about happiness for quite a long time, with individual, with groups, and with listeners and readers in various formats. I am always promoting the value of meditation — of finding that still, small voice inside of us, of getting in sync with nature, of slowing down our frenzied lives. I suggest making time for pleasure and counting our blessings. But one of the most important means to becoming happy is kindness. It's the one component of a happy life that has no substitute and that must be our set point if we are to know the bliss we seek.

All of us are here in this human existence so that we can be happy and at peace. We can create happiness in ourselves by one means more than any other: by being kind. And because kindness ripples outward, we can make the world a better place if we work towards cultivating kindness in



others.

## Random acts of kindness

An old bumper sticker used to implore other drivers to “Practice Random Kindness and Senseless Acts of Beauty.” These days we often hear about random acts of kindness being performed. Many of us have been in a line at the coffee shop where one customer after another picks up the tab for the customer next in line, and unbroken chains of random kindness can last for days.

Here are a few kind acts that may light a spark in you — one that can light another person’s candle, and then another’s.

- Walk someone’s cart from the parking lot to the cart corral.
- Hold a door.
- Offer a sincere compliment.
- Leave an extra-large tip.
- Pick up and throw away a piece of litter.
- Give canned goods to a food drive.
- Offer to pick up items from a store for a shut-in.
- Shovel or sweep a neighbor’s walk.
- Leave an encouraging note under a stranger’s windshield wiper.
- Do an extra task to lighten a coworker’s load.
- Hug (with permission) a loved one who looks down.
- Bring donuts to the office.
- Spend time with a child in your life.

Here’s hoping (and knowing) that the kindness you show comes right back to you, in the words of the Beatles song “The End”: “And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make.”

## About the Happiness Podcast

If you would like to learn more, the latest episode of the Happiness Podcast, hosted and created by [Dr. Robert Puff](#), is now available. The Happiness Podcast has over 250 episodes, with over 8 million downloads. Dr. Robert Puff, Ph.D., author of 13 books, TV show host, Psychology Today blogger, and corporate trainer, has been studying the actions it takes to reach the highest levels of human achievement for decades.

It is titled, #289 Happiness – The Ripple Effects of Kindness

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