

The Practice

- Kindness to you is kindness to me; kindness to me is kindness to you.

Why?

I usually describe a practice as something to do: get on your own side, see the being behind the eyes, take in the good, etc. This practice is different: it's something to recognize. From this recognition, appropriate action will follow. Let me explain.

Some years ago I was invited to give a keynote at a conference with the largest audience I'd ever faced. It was a big step up for me. Legendary psychologists were giving the other talks, and I feared I wouldn't measure up. I was nervous. Real nervous.

I sat in the back waiting my turn, worrying about how people would see me. I thought about how to look impressive and get approval. My mind fixed on me, me, me. I was miserable.

Then I began reading an interview with the Dalai Lama. He spoke about the happiness in wishing others well. A wave of relief and calming swept through me as I recognized that the kindest thing I could do for myself was to stop obsessing about "me" and instead try to be helpful to others.

So I gave my talk, and stayed focused on what could be useful to people rather than how I was coming across. I felt much more relaxed and at peace - and received a standing ovation. I laughed to myself at the ironies: to get approval, stop seeking it; to take care of yourself, take care of others.

This principle holds in everyday life, not just in conferences. If you get a sense of other people and find compassion for them, you'll feel better yourself. In a relationship, one of the best ways to get your own needs met is to take maximum reasonable responsibility (these words are carefully chosen) for meeting the needs of the other person. Besides being benevolent - which feels good in its own right - it's your best odds strategy for getting treated better by others. This approach is the opposite of being a doormat; it puts you in a stronger position.

Flip it the other way, and it is also true: kindness to yourself is kindness to others. As your own well-being increases, you're more able and likely to be patient, supportive, forgiving, and loving. To take care of them, you've got to take care of yourself; otherwise you start running on empty. As you grow happiness and other inner strengths inside yourself, you've got more to offer to others.

Kindness to you is kindness to me; kindness to me is kindness to you. It's a genuine - and beautiful - two-way street.

How?

The kindness to others and to yourself that I'm talking about here is authentic and proportionate, not overblown or inappropriate.

In ordinary situations, take a moment here and there to recognize that if you open to appropriate compassion, decency, tolerance, respect, support, friendliness, or even love for others it's good for you as well.

See the consequences of little things. For example, earlier today, in an airport, I saw a bag on the ground and didn't know if it had been left by someone. Thinking about this practice, it was natural for there to be some friendliness in my face when I asked the man in front of me if it was his bag. He was startled at first and it seemed like he felt criticized, then he looked more closely at me, relaxed a bit, and said that the bag was his friend's. His response to my friendliness made me feel at ease instead of awkward or tense.

Imagine what the other person's concerns or wants might be, and do what you can - usually easily and naturally - to take them into account. Then see how this turns out for you. Probably better than it would have been.

Also see how taking care of yourself has good ripple effects for others. Deliberately do a small thing that feeds you - a little rest, some exercise, some time for yourself - and then notice how this affects your relationships. Notice how healthy boundaries in relationships helps prevent you from getting used up or angry and eventually needing to withdraw.

In effect, you are running little experiments and letting the results really sink in. That's the important part: letting it really land inside you that we are deeply connected with each other. Helping others helps you; helping yourself helps others. Similarly, harming others harms you; harming yourself harms others.

It's as if we are connected in a vast web. For better or worse, what you do to others ripples back to you; what you do to yourself ripples out to others.

Recognizing this in your belly and bones will change your life for the better. And change the lives of others for the better as well.

~ Rick Hanson, Ph.D, neuropsychologist, New York Times best-selling author, Advisory Board member of the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley, and invited lecturer at Oxford, Stanford, and Harvard universities.