

Are We Too Busy to Be Kind?

Slowing down makes room for kindness and compassion.

by Susan Smith Jones, Ph.D.

Are people becoming less kind or is it just my imagination? From the halls of Congress to the main streets of small-town America, it seems like civilly listening to others whose viewpoints are different from our own has gone by the wayside.

I feel like we are in the midst of an epidemic where people on the whole simply have less time to be kind. This rampant form of busyness can be looked at as a sickness, a form of self-centeredness brought about by our constant rushing around and trying to make ends meet while coping with mounting stress and health issues.

Do you feel overwhelmed in your life today more than you did five or ten years ago? As I counsel people around the country and worldwide, it's been my experience that most people are indeed experiencing this due to (1) burning the candle at both ends every day, (2) experiencing severe lack of sleep, (3) finding less time to call their own, and (4) living in what I refer to as a "spin-cycle lifestyle."

The more we rush around without keeping our lives in perspective and balance, the less kind we are toward others, as well as ourselves. Most of us are living on the fast track these days: talking fast, eating fast, driving fast, and generally moving fast. What a different state of being and living this is from just 20 years ago.

Interestingly, most people in today's world can do more in one year—with appointments, people to meet, and places to go—than their grandparents did during their entire lifetimes. Given our current pace, we barely have time to relax and cultivate relationships with our spouses, children, and friends. Is it any wonder that stress-related diseases (heart disease, asthma, obesity) are on the rise?

We are even under pressure to keep busy in our leisure

hours, and spend hours on our computers after coming home from work. We want to do everything, and we want to do it all at once. We talk on the telephone and text while we drive (even though there are now laws against this), watch television while we read, and conduct business while we listen to the radio. I see this as a "busyness" epidemic.



Taking a moment to share compassion can go farther than you might think.

Compassion in Action

To illustrate how one kind gesture can so significantly affect people and situations, I want to share a scene that I witnessed recently at the airport. I was leaving Portland, Oregon to fly to Los Angeles. Because of stormy weather, most of the flights were delayed, and some were canceled. The airport was crowded with unhappy travelers, so I was delighted that my flight was scheduled to leave on time. As they announced the final boarding, I noticed a harried man running up to the counter with his briefcase in one hand and his ticket in the other. The ticket agent said that unfortunately his reservation had been cleared and his seat given away. She told him politely and kindly that she would do everything she could to get him a seat on a later flight. But he wasn't going for it, and went ballistic.

Everyone in the terminal could hear the extent of his frustration. He had an important meeting in Los Angeles, and he *had* to get there. I couldn't help but feel bad for him, because I've been in similar situations where I couldn't afford to miss a flight. But mainly everybody felt sorry for the ticket agent; especially since the man had also yelled out that he wanted to see a supervisor.

All of the sudden, a woman in her seventies walked up to the angry man and said that she wasn't in a hurry

and would be happy to give him her seat. As you can imagine, the man stopped right in his tracks and looked as if he was about to cry. He apologized to her, to the ticket agent, and to everyone around for his behavior, and thanked the woman for being an angel in his life. He boarded the flight smiling and relieved.

What a blessing for the lovely woman, too. The man never knew it, of course, but the airline got her on another flight just three hours later and also gave her a free, first-class, round-trip ticket to any destination served by the company. So she was truly twice blessed. Her example shows us how joy can be our constant companion when we walk a path of love and kindness.



Are we in the midst of an epidemic where we are simply too busy to be kind?

Compassion Check

In addition to stressing us out and depriving us of sleep, our busy lifestyles can also drain our hearts of compassion. But there are simple ways we can slow down our daily pace and make conscious choices to be kinder and more compassionate toward our fellow humans.

While you will find more details and accompanying studies and personal stories in my two books, *The Joy Fac-*

tor: 10 Sacred Practices for Radiant Health and Walking on Air: Your 30-Day Inside and Out Rejuvenation Makeover, here are some highlights to help make you bring more compassion into your daily life.

1. Sleep

Getting a mere six hours (or less) of sleep each night can make you feel more stressed, depressed, and impatient, as well as increases your blood pressure, and makes you more irritable. It's hard to feel compassionate when you are just trying to get through the day with a short fuse and not enough time to accomplish all you need to do. Research has shown that when you get more sleep on a regular basis, your stress level abates and you become a more compassionate person¹.

2. Meditate

You don't have to be a Buddhist monk to know how to meditate². As a disciplined meditator for over 35 years, I know of its benefits. Here's one simple way to meditate: find a special, quiet space in your home. Spend at least 15 minutes there first thing in the morning (and if you can fit in a second session, also do this before going to bed). Sit and close your eyes and focus on your breathing. Inhale and exhale slowly and deeply, focusing on the sound and rhythm of your breathing. Mentally visualize peace and calmness. By doing this your day will start and end on a stress-free note, and you will feel calmer and more compassionate.

3. Diet

What you eat affects your mood³. That's right. If you want to be kinder and more compassionate, you must eschew foods made with white sugar and white flour, and also avoid foods made with artificial flavorings, colorings, and preservatives. Choose to eat a plant-based diet full of foods as close to the way nature made them as possible; these are the foods teeming with antioxidants, nutrients, and fiber.

Wise Words on Kindness

"The pure loving kindness of one gentle soul could nullify the hatred of millions. It's time for all of us to be more tenderhearted and to show kindness to everyone."

Mahatma Gandhi

"If there is any kindness I can show, or any good thing I can do to any fellow being, let me do it now, and not deter or neglect it, as I shall not pass this way again."

William Penn

"World peace must develop from inner peace. Peace is not just mere absence of violence. Peace is, I think, the manifestation of human compassion."

Dalai Lama

"Treat others the way you wish to be treated."

Matt 7:12

"Spread your love everywhere you go."

Mother Teresa

Nature -

"Become more compassionate by viewing images of nature, especially expansive views such as an ocean scene or mountains."

4. Exercise

Mens sana in corpore sano is a Latin aphorism, usually translated as "A sound mind in a sound body." In a four-year study on 200 people, Dr. Malcolm Carruthers found that most people could ban the blues with a simple but vigorous 10-minute exercise session three times a week⁴. He found that just 10 minutes of exercise doubles the level of norepinephrine in the body, a chemical key to happiness. It was also discovered in another study that people became more compassionate after exercising outdoors as opposed to indoors.

5. Nature

Here's a simple and inexpensive way to become more compassionate. View a photo or an image of a nature scene. You can put it in your home or office and look at it a few times a day. In one study, it was revealed that those people who spent a few minutes a day viewing images of nature, especially expansive views of nature such as an ocean scene or the mountains, became more compassionate⁵. Even better than *viewing* images of nature is *being* outdoors in nature and experiencing it firsthand. When you have the choice, exercise outdoors: take a hike in the mountains, walk in your local park, enjoy a brisk walk on the beach, or ride your bike.

When we invite kindness to be our default position each day and seize the moments to extend compassion, our daily path in life will be brimming with light and joy.



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