Nice Guys Might Finish Last

But kindness wins every time

> *Three things in human life are important; the first is to be kind; the second is to be kind; and the third is to be kind.*
>
> **– HENRY JAMES**

Does it seem like the world has gotten meaner lately? Online interactions and political discourse feel harsher and more incendiary. Reality shows with the most conniving plot twists and spiteful dialogue rule the ratings. Even Mother Nature has felt less about the generous bounty and more about the brute force in recent years.

All those things have driven up our collective stress levels. According to a recent Gallup survey:

- **53%** of U.S. adults report being highly stressed.
- **37%** report being unable to do anything about it.

It's well known that consistent, unresolved stress can threaten mental and physical wellbeing and lead to serious health conditions. One other surprising thing excessive stress can do is make us meaner.

The Stress-Meanness Cycle

When we feel overwhelmed by stress, it triggers an ancestral danger response that, among other things, shuts down the prefrontal cortex—the logical part of our brain—to focus thought and energy into fight-or-flight.

This part of our brain also regulates behavior and engages empathy and caring. So, when it's shut down by stress, we're more likely to be harsh and lash out. In turn, that makes everyone even more stressed, and we have ourselves a vicious cycle.

MEANNESS → STRESS → MORE MEANNESS → MORE STRESS

If only we could get off the mean merry-go-round and play nice. Or better yet, be kind.

A Little Word History

Modern language uses the words "nice" and "kind" interchangeably, but they don't have the same meaning. If we go back in time to the origin of each word, the difference is clear.

Nice – Entered use in the late 13th century meaning ignorant, frivolous, or faint-hearted, and later in the 18th century came to mean pleasant or agreeable. Now, when we say someone is "being nice," we're saying they're polite or accommodating, but it still carries that whiff of timidity. Hence the old adage, "Nice guys finish last."

Kind – Entered use in the 5th century meaning alike or family, and later in the 13th century, it came to mean friendly, compassionate, tender, or doing good for others. Now, when we say someone is "being kind," we're saying they're deliberately thoughtful, helpful, and caring.

So?

There's a meaningful difference between niceness and kindness.

Niceness is a pleasant tone of voice or behavior often performed with the expectation that we'll get something in return or to avoid conflict or discomfort. It fosters shallow connections and comes from a weaker and more selfish position.

Kindness is an unselfish act of helpfulness or grace performed for someone else that requires us to know and understand others and their needs. It builds deeper connections and comes from a place of strength and integrity.

Find More Kindness

We've said it before, but it bears repeating: Kindness has a profound impact on wellbeing and quality of life. It's also contagious. When we help others, it encourages them to pass that kindness along in turn, making it great for the world in general.

Here are some ideas for generating more authentic kindness in everyday life.

- **Be present –** You can't help others if you don't notice when they need it. When out in the world and interacting with others, practice being in the moment and looking for opportunities to be kind. Is a friend or colleague behaving differently, like something might be going on? Is that dude glued to his phone screen about to step into oncoming traffic? Is the petite lady at the supermarket trying unsuccessfully to reach something on the top shelf?

- **Then, stop and help –** Ask people if they're OK when it seems like they're not. Intervene before phone dude steps off the curb. Say, "Hi, it looks like you're reaching for the baking soda. Can I help?", to the supermarket lady. Open doors for everyone behind you. (And for anyone in front of you if their arms or hands are full.)

- **Act with compassion –** Try to understand where others are coming from. Even when they are behaving rudely, or if you disagree with them. Do your best to respond calmly and with kindness when someone is mean. This one is not always easy, but you can get there by practicing empathy, amping up your compassion skills, and actively working to view the world through different eyes.

- **Don't forget yourself –** Being kind to others starts with being kind to ourselves. Try the 7 Days of Loving Yourself series from eM Life to set a good foundation and remember to practice balance and boundaries while helping others.

Finally, remember that even small but meaningful acts of kindness can make a monumental difference to a person in need. Now go be kind.

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