

*'The easiest small act of kindness you can do is to meet someone for a walk'*

that, if you're struggling with your own demons, it's easy to feel you're not in a position to help others.

'It's definitely harder to extend kindness to others if we ourselves are feeling stressed and anxious, or have been negatively affected by the pandemic or lockdown,' she says. 'At the best of times, if we're feeling down, we tend to recluse and not reach out, let alone at a time like this when uncertainty looms in nearly every area of our lives.'

However, McClymont says that if you've been feeling this way, reaching out to others in kindness is actually an important step for your own mental health.

'As humans, we need connection to community,' she reveals. 'Without it, we exacerbate negative self-talk and other harmful habits that adversely affect our mental wellbeing. When you reach out to others, you not only get to help them, but they may just be able to help you in return, by lending an ear to talk to.'

#### MENTAL HEALTH

Doing good deeds and improving your own mental wellbeing in the process can sound too good to be true, but the evidence is not just anecdotal; science has actually proven it to be the case.

'There are many studies that show helping others isn't just good for them, it's good for you, too,' says psychotherapist and founder of [Headucate.me](http://headucate.me) (headucate.me), Mark Newey. 'Volunteering is positively correlated with self-reported happiness, health and wellbeing. A study by Hunter and Linn demonstrated that, when compared with those who did not volunteer, older adults who volunteered regularly showed greater satisfaction in life and exhibited reduced rates of depression and anxiety.'

But why is this?

'The reason is a hormonal one,' continues Newey. 'When we help others, we get a release of oxytocin (the bonding hormone mothers get as they give birth) and dopamine, the reward hormone. This



**T**hroughout 2020, you'll likely have witnessed many acts of kindness and compassion, as many people have stood

together during the pandemic and lockdown. From volunteering to supporting vulnerable neighbours, to organising vital Food Bank collections, to sewing scrubs for the NHS, it seems the nation stepped up when help was needed.

But what if during this time – and beyond – you've been struggling? Perhaps you've been feeling isolated and alone, anxious or depressed, or plagued by financial worries. If you've been feeling low, it can be hard to put on a brave face and help those around you.

#### CAN YOU BE KIND IF YOU'RE STRUGGLING?

Puja McClymont, NLP Life Coach at House Of Wisdom ([houseofwisdomstudio.com](http://houseofwisdomstudio.com)), agrees

# TOO STRESSED TO BE KIND?

Feelings of stress and anxiety can make you feel like you have nothing left to give others. But might extending an offer of kindness actually be the answer?

Words: Claire Chamberlain



makes us feel good. It also means there's no room for the fight or flight hormones, adrenaline and cortisol. Helping others is genuinely good for our health.'

### ONE GOOD DEED...

Life coach and author of *On Purpose*, Steve Chamberlain ([stevechamberlain.co.uk](http://stevechamberlain.co.uk)), agrees that kindness, compassion and generosity are key when it comes to boosting your own mental health, as well as forming positive and fulfilling relationships with others.

'In being kind to someone else, you'll naturally be thinking about them and how you might be able to offer support,' he says. 'This takes your attention away from your own problems and helps you see the bigger picture. While this comes from a place of altruism, you may also receive a kind act or gratitude in return, which is likely to leave you feeling more positive. Kindness breeds kindness, and the emotions that follow are likely to be positive and self-enhancing.'

### SMALL ACTS OF KINDNESS

The good news is, you don't need to make grand gestures or even spend any money to be kind. A simple smile at a stranger in the street or asking how a friend or neighbour is (and truly listening) can have a powerful impact on how someone feels.

'The easiest small act of kindness you can do is to meet someone for a walk,' suggests McClymont. 'The closeness of being in someone else's company will immediately

*'Volunteering is positively correlated with self-reported happiness, health and wellbeing'*

make you feel better. If you're unable to get out, nothing beats a good video call with lots of laughter. Maybe watch something together (virtually) or virtually cook together – take mundane tasks and make them sociable.'

If you're concerned about someone else's mental health, it can feel hard to start a conversation about it – many of us worry we'll say the wrong thing. But just letting them know you're there for them is a wonderfully compassionate act.

'If you feel you're in a position to broach it with them, it's important that you give them the opportunity to open up in a way that feels safe for them,' says Chamberlain. 'You may want to explain why you're concerned, then let them know you're there for them and ask if they'd be open to having a conversation. Ultimately, you can only open the door – it's their choice to open up. If they do wish to share with you, a valuable first question can be, "What do you need?" We may assume they're looking for solutions to their problems, when actually they may just want someone to



## 'Helping others has opened my eyes'

When Rachel Mason, from Leigh-on-Sea, decided to hang bunting across her street during lockdown, she had no idea how her small acts of kindness would start to spiral...



'We'd been in lockdown for around a month when I noticed a road near me had hung bunting across their street. I decided I'd love to do the same, so, as I hadn't been in the area for long and didn't know my neighbours, I got up early one Sunday morning and hand wrote 40 notes to introduce myself. I mentioned the idea and offered to start a street Whats App group. It didn't take long to post them through the doors and by 9am I was finished and went for a run. My run didn't last long though – I had to keep stopping to take phone calls! People thanked me for the idea and commented how lovely it was to meet someone new.

'It was the calls from elderly neighbours that made me pleased I'd done it. They confessed they felt totally alone – it didn't really hit me until then that this was far more valuable than simply hanging bunting. If they needed anything, they could contact anyone on the street easily.

'I also learned that my next door neighbour was a nurse working in ICU when Covid was at its peak. It made me think about the other people out there working in similar roles and if there was anything I could do to let them know my appreciation. I decided to put together self-care packages for NHS workers, featuring items to help ease anxiety and promote restful sleep. I run a women's natural health company – Our Remedy ([ourremedy.co.uk](http://ourremedy.co.uk)) – so donated our signature CBD oil, plus a host of other sustainable pampering goodies, and ran the incentive on my Instagram page so people could nominate NHS workers in their area who deserved a pampering pick-me-up.

'You can easily forget other people live behind the doors around you – other people with problems who feel lonely, stressed or sad sometimes. Doing this has opened my eyes – I now make a conscious effort to say hi to strangers when I'm out. You never know how happy you might make someone with a simple gesture.'

### IS #BEKIND HARMING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH?

'Be kind' is a hashtag that's been trending on social media in recent months, but can it sometimes do harm rather than good?

If you struggle with anxiety, the pressure to participate when you're not in a good place might actually be damaging, so it's important to protect and nurture your own wellbeing.

'These messages often come from good-hearted people, but as with anything to do with mental health, it's important to remember those who are struggling,' reminds Puja McClymont. 'If you feel it's all getting

too much, it's important to either take a break from social media, manage your notifications better, or unfollow accounts that make you feel worse.'

And remember, true kindness is always inclusive – it's not simply a popular trend.

'If you're struggling with the "be kind" messaging, it's important to understand where the poster is coming from,' adds McClymont. 'They may simply post a hashtag and do nothing else – it may just be because it's a trend that day. As with anything on social media, the healthiest way to consume it is to not

take it all at face value. If social media is getting too much, spend more time in the real world with those who are naturally kind to you and who you can be kind to easily, too.'



really listen. Let them be your guide – your role is to listen deeply and offer support.'

### AN INSIDE JOB

If you've been feeling down or have been struggling with low self-esteem, it's often easy to forget how important it is to be kind to yourself, too. 'Choosing to be compassionate with yourself is one of the kindest things you can do,' reveals Chamberlain. 'We have a tendency to speak to ourselves in a way that we wouldn't dream of doing to those around us. So make sure you choose to be flexible and supportive of yourself as you move forwards. Choose to do things you enjoy. For some, this might be picking up your favourite book, for others it's a walk in the woods or going for a run. Each of us is unique, so tune into what's always made you feel content and do more of it.'