

Live Kind, Be Happy

How Simple Science-Based
Kindness Practices
Can Make You Happier



Celeste DiMilla, MS, LMFT, CAPP
with Louis Alloro, MEd, MAPP

Praise for *Live Kind, Be Happy*

Celeste and Louis seamlessly weave together science and page-turning stories of kindness, convincing us that kindness is a recipe for long-term happiness. This lovely book offers simple yet powerful practices to bring more kindness and happiness into your life and the lives of those around you. Read it yourself, then give copies to the people you care most about in this world.

—**Michelle McQuaid**, best-selling author and host of *Making Positive Psychology Work* podcast

With authenticity and a sound platform of research, Celeste gets to the heart of happiness: how we can use kindness to make our own lives better while improving the world around us. I love Celeste's writing style, and I know you will too. It feels like you're sitting with a wise and compassionate friend!

—**Nicole J. Phillips**, host of *The Kindness Podcast* and author of *The Negativity Remedy*

Live Kind, Be Happy is perfectly timed. Our fractured and stressed world has fostered rising anxiety, depression, unhappiness, and other mental health problems. According to global surveys by the World Health Organization, anxiety and depression are the two most prevalent emotional disorders in the world. We are in the middle of a mental health pandemic, and the whole world is desperate for a kinder, safer, and happier place to live.

Based on bona fide science, this book makes a convincing case for becoming happier through kindness. The authors provide concrete guidance in the form of simple practices that can be done organically in the course of daily life. The results may surprise and delight you.

Celeste DiMilla's writing style is authentic, skillful, and engaging, and she will keep you motivated to discover happiness by practicing simple acts of kindness. Her personal journey toward kindness is endearing, and readers are likely to identify with the challenge of developing new thinking patterns and behavior habits.

This book will lead you on the path to kindness, which if enough people participate could transform the world into a happier place to live.

—**Paul Foxman, PhD**, founder and director of Vermont Center for Anxiety Care, Burlington, Vermont, and author of *Dancing with Fear* (2007), *The Worried Child* (2003), and *The Clinician's Guide to Anxiety Disorders in Kids and Teens* (2017)

Live Kind, Be Happy is a treasure trove of insights into the connection between kindness and happiness.

A wonderfully inspirational read!

—**Orly Wahba**, founder and CEO of Life Vest Inside and author of *Kindness Boomerang*

There are so many books telling us what's wrong with us.

There are very few telling us what's right about us.

This book gives us hope and lets us know that even the smallest thing can change our own lives and the lives of those around us.

—**Brooke Jones**, vice president of
The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation

It is my hope that reading this book opens up the tremendous and renewable energy source that is kindness.

And I hope that from there we can start imagining and implementing kindness on a societal and structural level.

—**Kristen Truempy**, host of the
Positive Psychology Podcast

If you seek long-term happiness and care deeply about making the world a better place, then put this book on your required reading list. You will learn tons of simple and practical kindness practices that will not only boost your own happiness and well-being but do the same for those you love and everyone around you.

—**Emiliya Zhivotovskaya**, CEO and founder of
The Flourishing Center

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*To Ron and Lorrie Wenzler,
extraordinary role models of kindness.*

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INTRODUCTION

How Practicing Kindness Transformed My Life and Made Me Happier

This book started in, of all places, a bathroom at the Los Angeles International Airport (don't worry, it was pretty clean). I was at the sink trying to find "the sweet spot" to get the water to flow, but no luck. The middle-aged woman at a neighboring sink smiled brightly at me, stepped back, and said, "Here, you can use mine."

"Thanks," I said, feeling appreciative. I moved over to take her place at the sink, and as she exited the restroom, I overheard her say to a woman waiting in the line for the stalls, "I just had to stop and tell you that you're beautiful."

My heart sank. She hadn't said anything to me about how I looked. Why not?

I sneaked a peek at the other woman—a tall, slender, fashionably dressed twentysomething brunette with amazing

cheekbones. Then I looked at myself in the mirror. My softly layered golden-brown hair framed my face nicely. My skin was clear with a rosy glow, and there were no discernible wrinkles. I didn't think I looked bad for someone who was fifty. And that's when it hit.

Oh my God, I'm FIFTY!

The reality of my advancing age hit me like a ton of bricks, even though I'd already been fifty for several months. My life, unless I was exceptionally fortunate, *was more than half over*. What on earth had I done with the past half century?

I left the bathroom with my brain in negative overdrive, and by the time my husband Paul and I boarded our flight to Boston to visit his family, I'd convinced myself that I'd done nothing of significance with my life. I was an underachiever, a loser, a big fat zero. As I slumped into my seat, I thought, *Uh-oh, I'm having a midlife crisis*.

As I watched my husband wipe off his armrest, I thought about how I'd likely been in the midst of a midlife crisis before this moment but hadn't realized it. I'd actually been feeling like my life lacked meaning for the past few years. I didn't have children to give me a sense of purpose, and my vision of changing people's lives through my career as a psychotherapist hadn't panned out like I thought it would. In fact, I wasn't even *working* as said psychotherapist!

Here's exactly how that happened: After getting my marriage and family therapist (MFT) license, I opened a psychotherapy practice with much anticipation of helping people. Then I spent months waiting for someone to call (not exaggerating!). Two years into my practice I was still floundering, with only three clients. So when Paul and I had to relocate for his work, I actually felt relieved that I had to close my practice. I figured that moving would give me the chance to start

a fresh psychotherapy practice, but after Paul and I settled into our new home I procrastinated. I was scared: What if I failed again? What if I couldn't really help people? What if I never did anything meaningful with my life?

In an attempt to motivate myself and find some inspiration over the past year, I started reading self-help books. The one I was currently reading, *Creating Your Best Life* by Caroline Adams Miller and Michael Frisch, was in my carry-on bag.¹ Wanting to get my mind off my troubled thoughts, I pulled out the book and started reading. I read somewhat distractedly at first, but then on page eight I read: "we are living longer and healthier lives, which has changed the midlife crisis into the midlife opportunity."

Opportunity . . . hunh. It felt like the authors were speaking directly to me. I dog-eared the page, put a star by the sentence, and wrote *midlife opportunity* in bold lettering in the margin.

I continued reading, now at a feverish pace. And read I did—during the entire flight, in the car on the way to our hotel, sitting in the bathroom late that night (I didn't want any lights on in our room to keep my husband awake), while in a coffee shop the next morning, and then in the coin shop where my husband was selling his late father's collection.

I finished the book in two days. I also completed many of the exercises in the book, most of which involved creating a list of life goals. As I reviewed my list, I noticed that the first goal I'd written was *prioritize kindness*.

This was telling. Kindness had always been one of my deepest values, but I had to admit that I didn't always live as if it were. My life just seemed to be too busy to do the kind things I wanted to do, like train my wonderful fluffy white dog, Mambo, to be a therapy dog or teach free Laughter Yoga classes at our local senior center.

While having dinner that night with my husband and mother-in-law, I was troubled by the thought that I wasn't as kind as I truly wanted to be. I mulled this over while sipping a strong mai tai and came to the conclusion that my midlife opportunity was . . . *kindness!*

I felt a true sense of urgency about this: I had to do something really big *right now* to make up for lost time—a *half century* of lost time. My tipsy brain immediately formulated a plan, and in the midst of our quiet dinner I burst out, "I'm going to do something outrageously kind every day from now on!"

My mother-in-law looked at my husband and, with raised eyebrows, asked, "Is she for real?"

Used to my excitable nature, Paul didn't even look up from his pad thai noodles while matter-of-factly responding, "Yep, that's my wife."

Despite receiving very little fanfare upon uttering my for-a-lifetime promise, I was serious and undeterred. On the drive back to our hotel, I contemplated what I could do to be outrageously kind the very next day.

Maybe I can serve food at a soup kitchen over the next few days. No, that will take too much time away from visiting with family whom I only get to see twice a year. Hmm . . . what else could I do while I'm up here in Boston visiting family?

After a bit I decided to begin my daily practice of what I had deemed "outrageous kindness" by doing a lot of small kindnesses, like giving large tips and paying for the coffee of the person behind me. I rationalized that I could fit these in whenever I had a spare moment, and if I did enough of them—perhaps dozens a day?—this could be considered "outrageously kind."

The next day I woke up determined to follow through with being outrageously kind. The first thing I did was to write a thank-you note for the housekeeper—and leave next to it a very

large tip. When Paul noticed this, however, he said, “I want you to know that I support you in whatever it is you’re doing, but I’d appreciate it if you could find ways to be kind without spending a lot of money.”

My heart sank at his words, and I must admit, I pouted for a while. After I thought about it, however, I knew he was right. We didn’t have the resources for me to give money away dozens of times a day. So I caved and responded, “Okay.” It was obvious a different strategy was needed to fulfill my goal of being outrageously kind.

So while Paul drove us to a local coffee shop a little while later, I began texting several friends and family members to tell them how wonderful I thought they were and how much I appreciated them. I was bummed when no one immediately replied, but then I remembered that the people I’d sent messages to were all in California—and it wasn’t even 5:00 a.m. there yet!

Once we arrived at the coffee shop, I sat at a table while Paul waited at the counter for our lattes. There was an elderly couple sitting quietly at the table next to me, so I scribbled *May you be happy* on a napkin and handed it to them. They perked up, smiled at me, and said, “Thank you!” with so much feeling that I could tell they really appreciated my attention. Wow! Being kind felt wonderful.

While considering what other kindnesses I could do that day, I received a gushing, emoji-filled text message from my early riser of a mom telling me “how nice” it was to wake up to the text I’d sent. I felt like I’d really made her day, and this too warmed my heart.

When I looked up from the phone, my husband handed me our drinks and left to use the bathroom. While he was away, I wrote a silly love poem to him on his paper coffee cup. When

he returned and noticed it, he smiled broadly and said, “You’re a nut, and that’s why I love you so much!”

I was grinning as I too left to use the bathroom, which was down a hallway past several businesses. On my way back to the coffee shop I peered into a gym through a big glass window, and the young woman working there smiled at me. I decided that for my next kindness, I’d thank her. So I walked into the gym and said, “Thank you for smiling at me. I really appreciate that. You know, it’s just so nice when people smile.”

She seemed taken aback, but in a delighted way. Then, without even thinking about it, I said, “I’m doing this kindness thing, and I feel like giving you a hug. Are you okay with that?”

She seemed moved by this and we embraced. I felt so happy after this that I bounded down the hallway back to the coffee shop and excitedly told Paul what I had done. He didn’t lift his head up from his phone as he brushed me off with a “That’s nice, sweetie.” But I didn’t mind because my string of small kindnesses had boosted my mood considerably.

I continued doing kindnesses like this for the rest of that day and managed to get in a whopping forty-eight. For the next five days of our vacation I kept on with this practice, and by the time we boarded our flight home, I felt happier than I had in years. The past week had literally transformed me; I felt excited about life again!



Paul and I arrived home from our trip to Boston on a Monday, and I was fully committed to practicing outrageous kindness that Tuesday. But I woke up late and as I thought about my long after-vacation to-do list, doing dozens of kind acts felt like

too much of a burden on my already busy day. I rationalized that once I caught up with my chores, I'd go back to being outrageously kind.

Wednesday came with its usual stressors, so I put off my kindness priority again. And when I failed to practice it for the rest of the week, I vowed to start fresh on Monday. It didn't happen, and when another two weeks passed without performing a daily regimen of dozens of kindnesses, I began to wonder if I'd ever succeed. I was blowing my midlife opportunity, and this recognition bummed me out.

The fear of blowing it motivated me for a while, and I pushed myself to be outrageously kind. It worked for a few days here and there. Like the day I talked Paul and my sister, Michelle, into spending an afternoon with me brightly painting smooth small rocks with positive messages like "Spread love" and "Choose joy" and then leaving them in various places around Imperial Beach, California, for people to discover. While such days boosted my mood and made me want to do more, I found it difficult to be outrageously kind on a regular basis. Somehow it just seemed . . . too hard.

Then one day while washing the dishes, I listened to an episode on *The One You Feed* podcast titled "The #1 Mistake People Make When Trying to Change Behavior."² Host Eric Zimmer said the mistake people make is "starting too big." He gave the example of how when he first started meditating, he tried to sit for thirty minutes a day. This was so hard for him, however, that he'd manage for only a day or two and then quit. This happened over and over until he decided to start small and meditate for just two minutes a day. Over time he gradually built up his new practice to thirty minutes daily. Starting small made all the difference for him.

Hearing Eric's story reminded me that I had a strikingly

similar experience with my own meditation practice—but also that starting small was how I managed to develop a daily exercise habit *and* transition to a plant-based diet. It dawned on me that I was making the number one behavior-change mistake in trying to go from “normal” kindness to “outrageous” kindness overnight! It was like going from couch potato to marathon runner overnight, which is, well, outrageous. ☺

If I truly wanted to become a kinder person and maintain this for the rest of my life, the key was to start small.

I immediately let go of trying to be outrageously kind and developed a small-steps approach. I began by making a list of kindness practices I wanted to do more of. On it were things like:

- Being more generous
- Speaking more kindly to myself
- Creating micro-moments of love (more on this in chapter 6)
- Doing random acts of kindness
- Being kind to unkind people

I derived the items on this list from my mindfulness practice and psychology—especially positive psychology, the scientific study of what makes life worth living. Once the list was complete, I decided to focus on doing just one practice per week.

Right away I noticed several positive things with my new small-steps approach. The first one was that I actually did my weekly practice. (Round of applause!) I’m not saying I always followed through, but I was much more consistent than I had been when I was trying to practice outrageous kindness. I also noticed that I got more pleasure from practicing—likely because I didn’t feel stressed about squeezing lots of kind acts into my hectic daily schedule. And what surprised me most is that even such a small increase in my kindness lifted my

spirits and made me feel happier.

Over time I noticed additional benefits, such as relationships with important people in my life improving. I simply felt closer and more connected to these significant people when I was being kinder to them. I also got the sense that those I cared for felt closer to me as well. In fact, all these people were also, well, being kinder to me as well. My husband, for example, started writing me little notes to make me smile—and began cleaning the kitchen more often!

Another benefit I noticed was that I felt less anxious and less overwhelmed. I thought this was strange at first, but I later learned that research suggests kindness buffers the negative effects of stress. Being kind puts your focus on *others*—which distracts you from your own worries and issues.

I also felt like I had truly embraced my midlife opportunity and was living in accord with my deepest values. Being a little kinder mattered! It made a difference in my life and in the lives of those around me, and it made a difference in the world. (Kindness ripples out! I promise, there'll be more on this later.)

And happily, the more I practiced, the more kindness became my default mode in life. What a wonderful discovery that was!

Goodness knows, I'm still far from Mother Teresa-like goodness, but I'm improving.



Doing one simple kindness practice per week has been life-changing; in fact, it affected me so much that I thought, *Maybe I'll write a book on this so others can benefit too!* The problem was that I was already cowriting another book with Louis Alloro, my instructor from my certification in applied positive

psychology program (CAPP), a wonderful six-month personal and professional training program I'd just completed. He and I were writing a positive psychology manual for therapists and other professionals.

While I believed this manual was worthwhile, it also felt like an overwhelming undertaking for two novice writers. Plus, now I was on fire for kindness—that's what my heart truly wanted to write about. I felt torn: *Should I continue working on the manual or switch to writing a book about kindness?*

I shared my dilemma with Louis, and he kindly told me to follow my heart—that he'd support me with whatever I decided to do. We decided to continue to collaborate but transition to writing a book on kindness and happiness. Our plan was to share my personal experiences in the work, while together we'd present what science is discovering about the connection between kindness and happiness. Thus, the information and exercises in this book are a collaborative effort between Louis and me—although when the text says “I,” it will be referring to a personal belief, experience, or insight of mine (Celeste).

The book is intended to help you understand the connection between kindness and happiness. More than that, it is intended to help you become a little kinder and a lot happier—something that will also ripple out and create a kinder and happier world.

However, merely reading this book is unlikely to make that happen. To have a real impact on your life and the lives of those around you, you have to *do* the kindness practices. That's right, there's actual work involved!

But don't panic: this will be simple if you take it one small step at a time (as I learned, and as you'll learn how to do in this book).



Here's how Louis and I are going to offer what we know now about kindness and the science of it to you.

In part 1, you will learn about the connection between kindness and happiness, because it's stronger than you think. In these chapters you'll start by taking a fresh look at kindness, which is helpful because you probably haven't formally studied this topic since you were in kindergarten (and if you're anything like Louis and me, that feels like a long time ago). Next, you'll learn why being kind makes *you* (not just others) happy. After this, you'll discover the benefits of kindness—the happiness of others, yourself, and the world being chief among them. You'll wrap it up with just why you are going to succeed at being a kinder person to yourself, others, and the world.

Then, in part 2, you'll learn a variety of simple, evidence-based ways to practice kindness in your daily life. These kindness practices are “seeds”—seeds to plant and grow kindness and happiness in the many aspects of your life; seeds you can watch as they blossom and bear fruit each day. And seeds aren't scary at all—in fact, they're quite small and easy to handle, aren't they?

Louis and I are delighted to share these life-changing, and we believe *world*-changing, kindness practices with you. By doing these simple practices, you can be the change—yes, *you!*

You can be:

- The change in yourself
- The change in those you care about
- The change in the world

How's that for taking a midlife opportunity and turning it into not only a personal opportunity, but a worldwide opportunity?

XO

Celeste (and Louis too!)

Being Kind to Others Is Being Kind to You!

We all know that being kind can improve other people's lives in countless ways. But did you know that when you are generous and thoughtful, you begin achieving happiness in your own life and create a "ripple effect" that inspires the world to be nicer?

Live Kind, Be Happy illuminates how your personal commitment to kindness will improve every aspect of your life and ultimately be world-changing. In this science-based guide, psychotherapist Celeste DiMilla and positive psychology scholar practitioner Louis Alloro reveal the surprising connection between kindness and happiness:

- ♥ Practicing kindness makes us happier, healthier, more attractive, and less stressed
- ♥ Kindness improves our relationships—with parents, partners, children, and others
- ♥ Spreading love and showing kindness for just minutes a day in "micro-moments of love" can transform lives in memorable ways

By following these tested and practical tips, ideas, and practices, you'll find that it's simple to "live kind" and create lasting, impactful change in your life and beyond.

"Kindness is a recipe for long-term happiness. This lovely book offers simple yet powerful practices to bring more kindness and happiness into your life and the lives of those around you. Read it yourself, then give copies to the people you care most about in this world!"

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