Your Best Life

Your Best Life: Kindness is Its Own Reward

John D. Kelly IV MD

The novelist Henry James was asked by his nephew what he ought to do with his life and how he should live it. The great author responded: “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” [1].

As we all strive to live more peaceful lives, it would be wise to take James’s words to heart.

Kind deeds—a tender word, generous gift, or loving gesture—clearly enrich the lives of those who receive them and can lift the mood of even the most disheartened soul. Perhaps more importantly, being kind brings increased joy and well-being to the giver. If we extend charitable gestures to others, we can make ourselves happier and more joyful. In fact, evidence is accruing extolling the virtues of kindness in promoting happiness [4].

the antidote. In other words, a mere shift in attention to wholly invest in the story of each and every patient will recalibrate perspective and often terminate a seemingly endless stream of negative thinking.

A pause to breathe, coupled with a decision to focus on all the good one is doing with the singular goal of patient well-being, will tame whatever demons may be lurking in one’s cortex. Michael J. Baime MD, Director of the Penn Program for Mindfulness at the University of Pennsylvania Health System calls this, “Stop, breathe, and be” [2]. This mindfulness-based tool is an easy way to regain peace in a day that could otherwise be riddled with stress or frustration.

Once we are in the moment, we let go of any frustration that came before us and we do not contemplate the tasks that lie ahead. A simple, “How can I help you?” when entering a waiting room will immediately shift attention from thoughts of frustration, fatigue, tardiness, or fear of failure to the well-being of the patient before you. The patient’s response to your question may offer some perspective. What if your patient’s chief complaint is skin breakdown on the stump of an amputated leg? Not only can we at least momentarily forget our own concerns,

A Note from the Editor-in-Chief:

I am pleased to present the next installment of “Your Best Life,” a quarterly column written by John D. Kelly, IV MD. Dr. Kelly is an Associate Professor of Clinical Orthopaedic Surgery at the University of Pennsylvania. His column explores the many ways that busy professionals—surgeons and scientists—might find peace, happiness, and balance both at work and in their personal lives.

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A Focus Outward

Most of us find it difficult to be kind when we face trying times. A patient’s surgery is not going as well as planned and the next room is ready. As surgeons, we have all gone through this vexing experience. Most of us are prone to descend into negativity, overcome with feelings of distress, anxiety, and frustration. Yet these are the times that afford the most growth.

If a surgeon is experiencing a bad day, a return to the present moment is

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Your Best Life

but we often recognize that the plight and hardship of another gives perspective to our own perceived difficulties.

A Focus on the Now

As we focus outward and become intentional in bringing goodness to others, we become more present. Kind actions reorients us to this single moment in time. “How can I help you?” does more than shift attention. The question brings with it a return to now—the only moment in which kindness can be executed.

Even unforeseen complications can be portrayed in a kind and loving manner. After surgery, many orthopedists shun speaking to families about the procedure’s outcome. Most would rather be back in surgery where the familiar and comfortable looms. Unexpected outcomes are difficult to embrace and even more trying to convey to a patient’s family or friends. This time can be a wonderful opportunity to extend loving kindness, as one explains the nature and prognosis of a procedure. A focus on the family’s concerns reminds us that we do this for others.

Kindness to Self, Kindness to Others

The greatest barrier to a kind disposition is our own pain. Internal strife

does not lend itself well to being kind. However, when we become aware of our own pain, we can decide to be kind anyway.

In order to navigate the marathon journey of a vocation in orthopaedic surgery, self-compassion, or kindness to oneself is an essential virtue. Mistakes are inevitable, but they do not define us. When we become preoccupied with mistakes and exercise self-judgment, we lose confidence and compromise our ability to heal others [5].

Despite whatever dysfunctional and negative thoughts our brains are manufacturing, our brains can become rewired in time to think more loving and kind thoughts. How so? Interestingly, the most effective way to become kind to oneself is to be kind to others. In his masterful work *Getting the Love You Want* [3], author Harville Hendrix PhD elaborates on the phenomenon of how our unconscious mind (brain stem and limbic system) cannot differentiate between acts of kindness to others and ourselves. Our “old brain” as Hendrix refers to, merely processes signals from our cerebral cortex and cannot differentiate from actions directed outward or inwardly. Put another way, kindness to others is perceived by the old brain in the same way as kindness directed to oneself. According to Hendrix, the only way for each of us to truly get the

love we all crave and want, is to be kind to others [3]. Only then will our unconscious mind receive the loving messages necessary for healing of deep-rooted inner pain. We each have the power to continually extend loving kindness to others, and thereby bombard our old brain with healing messages. Just like practicing surgery refines neural impulses so that procedures ultimately flow lyrically, practicing kindness, in time, makes being kind easier.

Generate Uplifts

Wayne Sotile PhD writes extensively on resiliency in medicine, and notes that the most satisfied physicians do not escape hardships any more than burnt out doctors [6]. What distinguishes resilient physicians from emotionally exhausted ones is the presence of “uplifts” one receives in the course of day [6]. Dr. Sotile defines “uplifts” as positive and kind gestures, words, or actions that buoy the spirit. When we extend loving and kind gestures to others, they, in turn, will be much more inclined to do the same. Mirror neurons in our brain reflect back impulses they receive [4]. When we each receive loving gestures, mirror neurons will generate neural impulses, which will lead to loving actions, or “uplifts.”

Your Best Life

How does one receive more uplifts in one's life? The answer is straightforward: Give them. A kind word, gift, loving gesture, or any random act of charity will buoy the spirit of even the busiest of surgeons.

Tomorrow, Try This

1. Take the 3-week challenge. Be as kind as you can be for 21 consecutive days regardless of how you perceive others treating you.
2. Become aware of and own your negative emotions when they arise. Then be kind, anyway.

3. Keep a journal at your bedside and note the occasions you were kind in the last 24 hours. Also note the times when you could have been more kind or positive. Seek to practice more kindness the next day.
4. The next time you notice that you are having a bad day, decide to practice a random act of kindness to the next person (or patient) you encounter.
5. After 3 weeks, read through your journal entries. Recognize the transformation of your joy and those close to you.

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