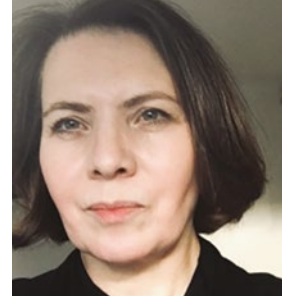


# THE POWER OF KINDNESS



**By Jenny Sinclair**

**A key message from our Putting Relationships First cell discussions has been how important it is to demonstrate and champion human qualities, for example kindness, warmth and honesty, in what we do. Here, Jenny Sinclair gives her view on kindness.**

‘We became more human – people were offering to help each other, delivering letters, doing errands and giving lifts...it wasn’t like that before. I think people had forgotten how to be kind.’

That comment on the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic was from my friend Mary. It took a crisis to remind us that being kind to each other is vital for our wellbeing. But that flush of neighbourliness during lockdown waned so quickly. Why do we keep on forgetting to be kind?

The answer, I think, lies in modernity, which has changed our culture both for good and for bad. We’ve seen vast improvements in efficiency and dramatic declines in discrimination. Some of us have seen huge prosperity. We can order anything directly into our homes. We enjoy the ‘freedom to choose.’

And yet, modern life is often unkind. Loneliness has increased, not just among the old but sharply among the young. More and more psychological pathologies are emerging, and our existential pain is increasingly medicalised.

Inequality has got a great deal worse. And as life has become more transactional, people trust their neighbours less.

We’ve been groomed into a false promise of freedom. A philosophy of hyper-individualism pits us against each other. The centralised state categorises us according to our rights, and the market commodifies us. The digital paradigm exacerbates this, as the algorithms of Big Tech (in both market and state) push us into ever narrower and ever more closed-off groups.

We’re increasingly estranged from each other’s different backgrounds and opinions. Schooled to focus on the self, we become less and less dependent on each other. Amidst this dehumanised mass of rights-bearing consumers, kindness struggles for attention.

For a few months in 2020, we were inspired by a surge of neighbourliness. It felt strange, but natural. However, it didn’t stick. The offers and expectations of kindness were too distant from the all-pervasive hyper-individualistic paradigm. We had forgotten how to be kind.

What is kindness anyway? In its etymology, it's related to 'kin', as in the kinship of family or nation. And, besides this sense of belonging, it also has roots in the Judeo-Christian concept of *chesed* which translates as 'loving-kindness' – giving oneself fully, with love and compassion.

Properly understood, kindness is ultimately loving-kindness: the practice of love, manifested in warmth, tenderness, compassion, honesty, generosity and self-sacrifice. These are virtues encouraged by interdependency – the less mutual responsibility we have, the less likelihood of developing the habits of kindness.

True kindness is not always obvious. When my son was eight, he commented on a very badly behaved boy in his class: 'Mum, Robert does his own ironing.' I was horrified: how could his parents be so negligent, and so unkind?

I was wrong. Robert's 'negligent' adopted parents understood that what this little boy needed was confidence. They knew it would be a kindness to help him develop competence. Robert is now a Head Chef in the Royal Navy.

Kindness should uphold the dignity of the person. 'Rescuing' someone from responsibilities is not kind. That aspect of kindness is easy to forget in a marketised society bent on pleasure and avoiding pain. Think of the #BeKind hashtag trends on Twitter, which encourages random acts of kindness, empathy and generosity.

But should we #BeKind to our friends no matter what they do? If someone is pursuing a foolish path, is it kinder to say nothing or to tell the truth? Which is more respectful? The loss of social credibility is

a risk, but we are in trouble when we place a higher value on loyalty than on right and wrong.

Authentic loving-kindness has a radical political edge. Because it makes us more interdependent and less reliant on economic products and government services. It builds relational power, strengthening our resistance against the powers that commodify and dehumanise.

But some activists intentionally misuse the meaning of '#BeKind' to close down debate. By framing opposing political positions as unkind, people are shamed into submission. This tactic of corrupting language is dishonest and coercive. It's also counterproductive, pushing dissent underground.

As Jonathan Haidt says, to develop sustainable solutions, opposing views need to be tested in the robust, free exercise of conscience and in mutual accountability. Kindness – in its true sense – is vital for intelligent politics.

Mary was right – we had forgotten how to be kind. We would do well to reacquaint ourselves with the fundamentals, as set out in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7:

'Love is always patient and kind; love is never jealous; love is not boastful or conceited, it is never rude and never seeks its own advantage, it does not take offence or store up grievances. Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but finds its joy in the truth. It is always ready to make allowances, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes.'

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