Mindful Work

Kindness and compassion

All of us suffer. We fall ill, get old, pay taxes, and die. Or we just get grumpy and depressed (not me of course!). As we've explored already, we suffer when we can't get the thing we want, or we get the thing we didn't want. We can all get bad days, bad moods, and bad coffee. As a result we may be horrid to those around us.

Kindness, or compassion, means **being with someone** in their suffering, walking alongside them without judgement as they work through their issues. It means **putting our ego down** while we focus on the other person's problems, which may be causing unpleasant behaviours. It is a state of **selfless attention** to others, with an intention to help them through their suffering.

In fact **we are hardwired to be compassionate**, due to what are called mirror neurons. These neurons fire in sympathy with another person; so if we see someone in pain, the pain area of our own brain lights up, even if we don't feel the physical pain (ref Tania Singer et al).

Like any habit, being kind, or simply wishing others well, may seem clunky at first, but as those neural pathways develop it becomes more natural. These are good habits to develop; not only is this behaviour likely to benefit others, but there's every chance that you become a nicer person to work with, live with, or do business with, so you'll get on better. **Being kind is a win-win situation**!

Matthieu Ricard, a French meditation teacher and monk, was wired up for nueroscientific experiments. The researchers found that when meditating, his high-amplitude gamma synchrony (an indication of happiness) went off the scale, and he has been dubbed the 'happiest man on earth'. When asked what mind state is the happiest, he replied 'compassion'.

Daniel Goleman, author of *Primal Leadership: Unleashing the Power of Emotional Intelligence* , says this type of meditation can impact our mind and our outlook "right from the get go." Goleman explains:

'' It turns out that the brain areas that help us or that make us want to help someone that we care about also connect with the circuitry for feeling good. So it feels good to be kind and all of that shows up very early in just a few hours really of total practice of loving-kindness or compassion meditation.'

Exercise: Kindness for self and others

First, bring to mind an issue that causes you to suffer – ideally not the biggest problem in your life but just an annoyance or something that makes you feel upset or a little angry. Let this issue revolve around your mind for a while, until you're able to experience the feeling of it in your body. Make a mental note of these feelings, and the unease or discomfort. Do not try to resolve anything or work it out, just observe with curiosity.

Now bring to mind a friend or colleague whose behaviour you have recently found unpleasant. What is the main thing that occurs to you? If it's how that behaviour affects **you**, *note these feelings and set them aside. Now get into the shoes of the other person, actually imagine that you are in their body. What are they feeling, and how strong is it?*

Having experienced the suffering of the other person, can you see that it is their suffering that has caused your suffering? If you are unpleasant back, is the sum of the suffering going to increase or decrease? What is a better way out of it all?

In a purely practical sense, next time you meet this person what might you say or do differently, particularly if they display the same unpleasant behaviours? Be skilful in this action, and make sure that you don't fuel their suffering further. It might be that you do nothing at all, other than commit to letting kindness be your guide; but this in itself will subtly change the interaction between you. Even one little smile may go a long way.

Exercise: Kindness while walking

I love this simple, profound exercise and it amuses and amazes me every time.

Here's what to do:

*Go for a walk, or just do this on your daily journey to work. First, notice all kinds of **things** around you, and simply radiate intense kindness to each and every thing: a paving slab, and slug, a blackbird, the gutter, someone's car sticker….*

*Now, having radiated kindness for say 5 minutes to all those objects and animals, you start with **humans**. As you pass someone, you radiate intense feelings of kindness to them. You could catch their eye and smile if it feels ok to do that, but if it doesn't feel right, just radiate the kindness anyway. Don't choose some and leave out others, do it for everyone.*

*See how this makes **you** feel.*

Where else could you try this out?