Kindness is experiencing a boom. A series of headline-grabbing scientific findings, such as ‘Spending money on others promotes happiness’ and ‘Empathy triggers oxytocin release’, has led to articles in the popular media trumpeting ‘5 Ways Science Proves Kindness is Good for Your Health’. Popular science books such as Franz De Waal’s *The Age of Empathy: Nature’s Lessons for a Kinder Society* have re-asserted what Darwin himself observed: that humans have an enormous capacity for prosocial, cooperative and altruistic behaviour. Websites focused on spreading kindness, organisations embracing it and educational initiatives aimed at cultivating our better nature are in abundance. And scientific reviews, such as Sonja Lyubomirsky and Kristin Layous’ 2013 paper, claim that people can increase their happiness through practising kindness. If the headlines are in step with the times, kindness is ‘the new cool’.

This surge in interest in kindness is likely the result of several developments. First, a wealth of converging scientific evidence has shown that empathy and altruism are innate, and emerge spontaneously in early childhood (e.g. Warneken & Tomasello, 2009). Second, there has been the inexorable rise of ‘positive psychology’. And third – perhaps – the societal need to hear some good news. In the current political, economic, and environmental climate, having something like kindness to believe in is vital for keeping us positive and hopeful.

All this is encouraging. Few people seriously doubt that kindness is a good thing (although there can be a lot of cynicism around it). But just how deeply does human kindness affect us? And can we develop a science of kindness that can lead to positive societal change?

**The ‘power’ of kindness**

Consider the following findings:

- **Kindness reduces anxiety**: Socially anxious participants who engaged in acts of kindness for four weeks showed a decrease in social avoidance goals. The authors concluded: ‘Engaging in acts of
kindness is an effective way to reduce state-level social anxiety.

- **Nice guys finish first:** Across three experiments, in a social dilemma game where participants could either benefit themselves or their group, the most altruistic members gained the highest status in their group. The authors reported: ‘Our findings unequivocally show that altruistic group members received more status. They were more respected, held in higher esteem, and were more likely to be chosen as group leaders.’

- **Empathy reduces the common cold:** In a randomised-controlled trial, patients who rated their clinicians as showing greater empathy had reduced common-cold severity and duration, and increases in immune response levels.

- **Giving time gives you more time:** Participants in a study spent their time writing and mailing a letter to a gravely ill child. Later that day, they perceived they had more time to themselves than did controls.

- **Spending on others is good for your heart:** Participants with high blood pressure were randomly assigned to spend payments on themselves or on other people. Those who spent money on others exhibited decreased blood pressure over the course of the study. The magnitude of the effect was comparable to antihypertensive medication or exercise.

These are pretty startling results, and all are published as experimental studies in peer-reviewed scientific journals.
journals. Each would make an intriguing media headline (and some have). The common cold, lack of time, workplace competitiveness and aggression, high blood pressure and anxiety disorders are all major problems in Western society. What if kindness is the cure? Well, it may or it may not be. The thing is, we just don’t know – yet. The above experiments are undoubtedly interesting, but they are inconclusive because they are just single studies. What is needed is a body of research that seeks to answer a consistent question concerning the effects of kindness. I have searched and surveyed the scientific literature on kindness and only one cohesive body of research exists: that which attempts to answer the question ‘Does helping/giving to others increase the wellbeing of the helper/giver?’ On close inspection of that research, the picture that emerges is not quite so newsworthy.

Does kindness increase wellbeing?

Researchers have tackled this question in a variety of ways, with far the two most common approaches being ‘prosocial spending’, and ‘acts of kindness’. In prosocial spending experiments participants are given some money and offered the opportunity to donate it to, or buy something for, others. In acts of kindness experiments participants are typically instructed to perform several kind behaviours towards other people over the course of the study. Let me just provide a flavour of the experiments conducted:

In ‘Spending money on others promotes happiness’, a 2008 study led by Elizabeth Dunn at the University of British Columbia, participants were given an envelope of either $5 or $20 and asked to spend it by 5pm that day. In the prosocial spending condition, they were asked to spend the windfall on a gift for someone else or to donate to charity. Those who spent the money on others (regardless of the amount) reported greater post-spending happiness than did those who spent on themselves. And in a 2015 study led by Lara Aknin in the close-knit community of the Pacific Vanuatu islands, participants were randomly assigned to purchase (with money given to them) candy for themselves, or for friends or family. Positive affect increased in the prosocial spending group.

As for acts of kindness, a 2010 study by Kathryn Buchanan and Anat Bardi asked participants to carry out kind acts each day for 10 days. An increase in life satisfaction was observed compared with controls. And in a six-week experiment led by Katharine Nelson and published in Emotion, participants were randomly assigned to carry out acts of kindness to others, or to the world/humanity or to themselves, or were controls. Prosocial actions (other-kindness and world-kindness) led to greater psychological flourishing than self-kindness or control.

In keeping with the headlines, all these studies show a positive effect of helping on the wellbeing of the helper. But across these four studies the sizes of the experimental effects vary from very large (in Vanuatu) to very small (in the Nelson study). There are also many variations in the way that kindness is treated in these studies. There are charitable donations, and there is gift buying, sometimes to close family and friends, and other times to whom we do not know. Kind acts are carried out one per day for 10 days, or three per day once a week – and we do not know what acts were carried out, and to whom. We could reasonably hypothesise that carrying out acts of kindness to some people (e.g. solvent colleagues versus needy strangers), and by some people (the busy versus the lonely), would differentially affect the dependent variable. This lack of consistency makes a robust appraisal of kindness impossible.

But on a positive note, an effect is observed; despite these different methodological treatments of kindness. With colleagues led by Oliver Scott Curry at the University of Oxford we are publishing a meta-analysis of this work that includes 27 experimental studies in total. We found the overall effect to be small to medium. On a five-point scale the average increase in wellbeing is equivalent to a half-point jump. That’s not bad, but it’s not quite as exciting as the media would have us believe.

I think that the effects of kindness could be more compellingly explored if the different types of kindness, by different types of givers, and different types of receivers, were systematically varied. Investigating kindness in this way would, I predict, have a dramatic influence on wellbeing (and other measures) and give us greater insight into the effects of kindness on psychological flourishing. In collaboration with researchers at the University of Oxford, kindness.org (an NYC-based non-profit that I work with) are currently doing just that, by running a number of large-scale experimental studies of kindness interventions.

Interestingly, the converse question, whether ‘kindness increases the wellbeing of the receiver’, has been hardly studied. In ‘reactions to random acts of kindness’, a 2000 study led by Kim Baskerville people were approached at random in public places by the researcher and handed a flower with the comment ‘Have a nice day’. Coders judged and recorded the responses of the receivers, from very negative to extremely positive. The overall responses were not reported; however, males tended to respond more

**Key sources**


Full list available in online/app version.
Kindness as socially transformative

The possibility that recipients of kind acts will ‘pay it forward’, resulting in a spread of prosocial behaviours through social networks, hints at the potential for kindness to be socially transformative. It’s one thing to determine the direct effect of a kind act on an individual, but something far more captivating to demonstrate that kindness can improve the wellness of communities and institutions. A recent study led by Joseph Chancellor et al. (2017) speaks to just this. In an experiment involving workers at Coca-Cola’s Madrid site, the researchers found evidence that receivers of acts of kindness enjoyed significantly higher levels of happiness compared with controls. Furthermore, the receivers of kind acts also paid them forward: they engaged in nearly three times more prosocial acts than did controls, and not just to the givers, but to other employees also.

What is kindness and how can we measure it?

The capacity for kindness is fundamental to human nature. Its importance as a universal character strength and virtue is recognised widely in the field of positive psychology, and falls under the factor of ‘Humanity’ in Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman’s 2004 VIA Inventory of Strengths. However, one of the difficulties in researching kindness is that kindness can mean different things to different people. Glancing back at the studies mentioned, we see that kind acts vary from study to study. Typical instructions in experimental studies of kindness have been: ‘Kind acts are acts that benefit others, at some cost to yourself’ (in Lyubomirsky’s study). But let’s say that I give my daughter money to catch the bus, and that I do it after some arm-twisting, rather than out of benevolence – is that kindness? I do not think it is. And yet, it would comply with the experimental instructions.

The very notion of kindness itself is entangled with other concepts such as altruism, compassion and prosocial behaviour. Indeed, several people I have spoken with about this have asked, ‘Isn’t kindness just the same as altruism?’ Yet psychologists have begun to use the term kindness in their papers, and I’m specifically looking at that research literature. However, I do think kindness is distinct. Altruism refers to a specific exchange: a loss to one individual and a gain to one or more others. Simple acts of kindness, such as smiling kindly at someone who looks down in the dumps, hardly – except in the remotest sense – constitutes a ‘loss’. Moreover, the increasingly popular ‘Effective Altruism’ movement, which encourages its members to give away a proportion of income to benefit the less fortunate, uses reason, and not compassion, to arrive at its modus operandi. That does not mean to say that members are not acting with kindness – many undoubtedly are – but the movement itself argues that the decision is a rational one, not a compassionate one. Is kindness synonymous with compassion? Quite likely compassion is an aspect of kindness – but one can be compassionate without acting on it. I’d argue that compassion without action is not kindness. It’s interesting to note too, that the idea of self-kindness (a condition in Katharine Nelson’s study) is not alien to many people, whereas self-altruism is oxymoronic.

The essence of kindness, then, is more nuanced than we often consider. It is not a single thing, does not perfectly overlap with altruism and compassion, and has both behavioural and affective components. To fully explore how kindness impacts lives, it needs to be unpacked, its dimensions identified, and its degrees measured.

There is in fact just a single research study that has rigorously explored what psychological processes underlie kindness and how it can be measured. Recognising the lack of research on how to define and measure kindness, David Canter and colleagues’ 2017 paper took a factor-analytic approach to
analyse responses to a series of statements relating to kindness. They identified three components to kindness: *benign tolerance*, a type of everyday courteousness, acceptance and love of one’s fellows; *empathetic responsivity*, a consideration of the feelings of other particular individuals; and *principled proaction*, broadly altruistic behaviour that is proactive and about behaving honourably. They also identified an overarching aspect of kindness: *core kindness*, which relates to empathy but tends towards active gestures born of warm feelings for others.

This work is a significant step forward, and could prove very useful in helping to advance understanding of the effects of kindness on individuals and on wider society. By building from here to form a detailed architecture of kindness, studies can be designed that test different aspects of kindness, and can better assess the contributing effects of types of kindness, whilst accurately measuring the degree of kindness that an experiment stimulates. It will be interesting to observe how science unravels something that humans have known instinctively since early in our evolutionary history: that kindness matters, and it makes a difference.

**Cultivating and applying kindness**

Developing a scientific account of kindness and its effects is worthwhile. But we can go further. Efforts have been made to cultivate and to spread kindness, helping to embed it in society and create change.

An approach that is gaining traction is kindness-based meditation, which directs attention outward towards other people. Cendri Hutcherson’s team found that just a few minutes of loving-kindness meditation (LKM; directing compassion and wishes for wellbeing towards other people) can be effective in increasing feelings of social connectivity and positivity towards *novel* individuals. A pioneering online RCT study in 2016 led by Julieta Galante testing a four-week beginner course of LKM, found increased wellbeing and altruism. University of Wisconsin-Madison researchers led by Lisa Flook have trialled a 12-week mindfulness-based school ‘Kindness Curriculum’, which, through teaching kindness, has shown positive effects, including an increase in prosocial behaviour.

Cultivating and extending kindness is an important step in creating a kinder society. Once goodness is established in social networks, the potential for prosocial behaviours and emotions to spread exists. Indeed, substantial evidence supports the notion that kind acts are contagious: James Fowler and Nicholas Christakis’ seminal research has suggested that ‘once networks are established, altruistic acts – from random acts of kindness to a cascade of organ donation – can spread through them’. Promisingly, the research shows that prosocial actions can mutate and cross behaviour types, and even jump from behaviour to affect (Nook et al., in press). Therefore, as kindness spreads it may transcend its origins and multiply to be more effective.

**Conclusion**

Kindness is currently enjoying something of a renaissance, not just in the media and popular culture, but in psychological science too: all the articles I have cited were published this century. And while the findings from many of these studies are tantalising, perhaps they too readily lead to proclamations that kindness can ease our contemporary crises. As scientists, we need to be more cautious in how we interpret and promote our research.

I’ve tried to take a balanced (some might say sober) view of the burgeoning kindness literature, and in so doing may have sprinkled some water on the kindness fire. No doubt, being kind does measurably boost wellbeing. But, collectively, the evidence shows that the effect is overall lower than much of the writing on kindness asserts. A large contributing factor to that result is the lack of experimental control over the nature of the kind acts and the giver–recipient dyad. There have been recent calls from the psychological science community to improve the reliability and efficiency of scientific research, and the adoption of stringent measures to achieve this would greatly benefit kindness research. A more sophisticated appreciation of what kindness actually is, and the complex and subtle aspects of its interactions, would facilitate a refined view of kindness’s impacts.

What would it do to our society if kindness became elevated in importance? It has been fashionable over the last few decades to devote oneself to pursuing ‘happiness’ and to becoming ‘mindful’ – this, so positive psychology says, is the route to a good life. But there has been a backlash against this individualistic and inward-focused approach to living. That, I gauge, is one reason for the surge in interest in kindness and prosocial behaviour. The real value in directing one’s attention to helping other people is perhaps that it gives meaning to life, in a way that self-attention never can (Burrell, 2017).

In my view, the beauty of kindness is that it is open to anyone. We can all opt to choose kindness if we wish. It is free, easily accessible to rich and poor alike, and is universally understood. Thus, if it turns out that simple acts of everyday kindness can send ripple effects of wellbeing through society, then promoting and facilitating that has to be a constructive pursuit.