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The Therapeutic Power of Kindness

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Staff kindness as an important therapeutic value has been neglected or disregarded in reclaiming troubled students. The author defines kindness in practical terms and describes it potency in changing troubled youth.

As I paged through my photo albums of colleagues I have worked with over the years, I wondered why so many of them were so successful with troubled students. I knew they were professionally well trained and dedicated, but I speculated that they must have another common thread among them. I realized they also displayed ongoing acts of kindness toward their students during times of student conflict. This triggered a host of questions and thoughts regarding the therapeutic value of staff kindness during a student crisis.

Kindness and Capitalism

In our competitive, make-it-to-the-top, be-number-one society, kindness is not awarded the same value or status as the attributes of money, power, beauty, and fame. Kindness is not viewed as being critical to personal success in everyday interactions. Kindness is often thought of as doing something nice or extra for a person when it is convenient or when such an act will receive ample public approval and praise. Kindness does not appear on Dave Letterman's list of the 10 reasons for helping at-risk and troubled children and youth, the homeless, AIDS victims, prisoners, welfare recipients, or drug users.

There is an alternative view: Kindness is envisioned as a vital force to our well-being and in our therapeutic work with troubled students. Just as sunlight is the source of energy that maintains organic life, kindness is the source of energy that maintains and gives meaning to humanity. Without sunlight and kindness, neither organic nor compassionate life can exist on this planet. Without the spirit of kindness, we become self-centered, vain, and emotionally cold; we inadvertently make life more difficult for those around us. Only by demonstrating interpersonal kindness can we prevent our "milk of human kindness" from turning sour—we are kind to others not because they will appreciate us and say "thank you." We are kind to others because it is a nurturing act and the right thing to do. Acts of kindness offer hope to troubled students who feel hopeless. They affirm and strengthen the need for having a supportive relationship during stressful times.

A New Interest

My interest in acts of staff kindness grows every time I visit a special school, a group home, or a residential program and talk with the students and staff about their concerns, hopes, and dreams. I believe in the importance of staff kindness as a therapeutic force, but I am not sure how it can be translated from a generic theory to specific intervention skills. This article represents my first-draft thinking about staff kindness. The following questions and comments are offered as an invitation to take a different look at kindness and, it is hoped, to get others involved in this concept.

Six Questions About Kindness

1. *How is staff kindness defined?*
2. *Why are troubled students initially resistant to acts of kindness?*
3. *What is the connection between acts of staff kindness and the development of a trusting student-staff relationship?*
4. *Can acts of staff kindness be identified and classified?*
5. *Are acts of staff kindness remembered by troubled students?*
6. *Are acts of staff kindness also beneficial to staff?*

1. A Definition of Staff Kindness

Kindness is a behavior driven by the feeling of compassion. Compassion is an emotion that cannot be seen or touched, but can only be felt in our inner life. The feeling of compassion develops when we take seriously a troubled student's stressful reality, including his or her emotional state and external circumstances. This ability to experience willfully and vicariously a student's emotional turmoil is a definition of compassion. However, if we also act on this feeling of compassion in a helpful and caring way, this behavior becomes an act of kindness. *An act of kindness is defined as any staff behavior that brings inner relief and comfort to a troubled student in a current state of distress.*

2. Why Troubled Students Initially Resist Acts of Staff Kindness

Most troubled students who are placed in special programs because of emotional and behavioral problems have a developmental history filled with early, intense, and prolonged experiences of adult neglect, abuse, and rejection. Over time, these traumatic life experiences will harden them against accepting any acts of staff kindness as genuine. When these young people enter a new program, they arrive with a chip on their shoulders and search for staff to entice into knocking it off. They seem conditioned to perceive any new staff relationship as toxic rather than enriching. Any attempt by staff to get close to students is met with suspicion, alarm, and rejection. Predictably, these students react to any positive staff attempts by either "biting" or avoiding any psychological "hand that tries to feed them." At this stage, these students do not have accurate perceptions of the adults, nor are they able to accept any acts of staff kindness as genuine. This lack of trust in staff creates a significant treatment problem. Nicholas Hobbs (1982), founder of Project Re-Ed, highlighted this concern when he wrote about the role of trust in facilitating his 12 Re-Ed principles:

> *Trust between student and staff is essential. It is the foundation on which all other principles rest. Trust is the glue that holds teaching and learning together. Trust is the beginning point of the re-education process. (pp. 22-23)*

If trust is the centerpiece of any effective therapeutic program for troubled students, then a rigorous understanding of trust is necessary. Trust is described as an emotional bond between people that cannot be won or awarded. Trust is based on a relationship that must be earned slowly over time. To trust someone is to believe that person will not exploit or betray your confidence. To trust someone means you can count or rely on that person today and in the future. For example, if I call my friend, Larry Brendtro, and ask him to help me, I know in advance he will do it. Larry and I have struggled through some difficult professional problems together as co-editors of this journal, and, because of these experiences, I know he is trustworthy. I have confidence in our relationship.

Acts of kindness offer hope to troubled students who feel helpless.

However, what if I had lived with adults who were not trustworthy but who exploited me? As an example, let me tell you about Tyrone. Tyrone was 9 years old when he was admitted to our Rose School day-treatment program. He was extremely withdrawn and had an overwhelming fear of all male staff. It took 3 months before we discovered that his single mother's boyfriend had traumatized him. One evening, Tyrone ran into his mother's bedroom when the two of them were in bed. The boyfriend became so angry that he grabbed Tyrone, tied a rope around his legs, and dangled him out of the third-floor window until he promised never to run into the bedroom again.

Given this frightening and unconscionable experience, isn't it reasonable for Tyrone to have a pervasive sense of mistrust and to view all new male relationships with doubt and suspicion? Wouldn't he be particularly concerned if a male staff member told Tyrone he wanted to be his friend and Tyrone should trust him? Psychologically, there was only one way for Tyrone to test the validity of this proposed friendship. He would systematically make the staff member's life miserable by challenging his authority; depreciating his personality, race, and religion; ridiculing his professional competence; bad-mouthing his family and ancestors; and, ultimately, physically fighting with him. All of these behaviors were designed to discover if this person could accept and manage Tyrone, or if the alleged friendship was a false mask covering a true nature that was aggressive and hostile.

This interpersonal battle between a troubled student and staff concerning the underlying issue of trust is inevitable, and its outcome is crucial to the success of any therapeutic program. Unfortunately, this battle becomes even more difficult and explosive when the student begins to like a staff member.

The resolution for such a struggle involves three staff skills: The staff must (a) be aware of the underlying dynamics of this relationship, (b) have the skills to manage the student's counter-aggressive feelings, and (c) demonstrate continuous acts of kindness toward this student.

3. What is the Connection Between Acts of Staff Kindness and the Development of a Trusting Student-Staff Relationship?

Staff kindness includes both a commitment to and the ability to put our personal needs last in line. First and foremost, we must focus on the needs of a troubled student and, second, on the needs of the group. Third, we must maintain the ongoing program, and, finally, we must meet our own needs.

The most important therapeutic need for the student is to develop a trusting relationship with a staff; therefore, the primary goal for staff members is to behave in ways that will promote and foster this relationship. Continuous acts of staff kindness will help in developing a trusting student-staff relationship. The following analogy shows how acts of staff kindness can overcome the student's resistance and fear of interpersonal closeness.

> *Whenever there is a struggle between a rock and a stream, the stream wins, not because it is stronger but because it persists. Similarly, staff acts of kindness are like a continuous stream of caring in the face of a rocky relationship. Over time, kindness succeeds, not because it is tougher but because it persists. Kindness has the forceful energy to wear down the rough, harsh edges of any formidable student, allowing a new and smoother relationship built on mutual trust to remain.*

4. Are There Different Types of Staff Kindness?

Because crisis is an opportunity to teach insights into a student's pattern of self-defeating behavior, to learn some new interpersonal skills, and to enhance a relationship with staff, a student crisis also is an opportunity to demonstrate the value of staff kindness. Our staff at the Institute of Psychoeducational Training reviewed over 200 written Life Space Crisis Interventions and identified six different types of acts of staff kindness.

Protection. Our primary responsibility as staff is to guarantee the physical safety of all students in our program. This also includes protecting a student from his or her own primitive impulses when the student loses self-control and tries to attack others or to injure him- or herself. When this happens, we are obligated to intervene and to restrain the student in a firm but kind way. This is not an easy task for staff. Whenever we are involved in a physical restraint, it will stir up strong feelings of counter-aggression in us. Unless we learn to feel comfortable with these uncomfortable feelings, we are not going to be helpful to a student in a crisis.

Understanding and managing our own anger is the first step in achieving the act of protection. Once this is accomplished, the messages the students could hear are: "1 care enough about you to protect you from your own fearful impulses." "If I had not held you, what do you think you might have done?" "The fact that you had to be held is not a point against you." "I'm not angry at you. I'm pleased you are in control of your feelings and behaviors." "I'm pleased I had the opportunity to help you during this difficult time."

Protection as an act of kindness is an experience that fosters the student's feelings of trust in staff.

Forgiveness. The act of forgiveness is well-established as a universal principle among all religions. Forgiveness is a kind and liberating way of purging acts of wrongdoing and feelings of guilt. Forgiveness wipes the slate clean and gives others an opportunity to begin again without any handicapping conditions.

Forgiveness also is an important part of our work with troubled students. Just as it is in the nature of lemons to be sour, it is in the nature of troubled students to behave in impulsive and primitive ways under certain conditions. When they are angry, sad, fearful, or confused, and their behavior is driven by their feelings, they often will say and do things that are offensive, repulsive, and hurtful. Although these behaviors cannot be condoned, we must not add up all the students' misdeeds and hold them in our hearts. The act of forgiveness begins with understanding the complexity of behavior and our own history of personal woundedness. Once we have forgiven those in our life who have caused us pain, we become ready to forgive the misdeeds of troubled youth during dysfunctional times. Staff forgiveness is a potent act of kindness because it brings inner relief to students in distress.

Emotional Support. Providing emotional support to a troubled student is the most frequent act of kindness. Emotional support means the ability to take a stand with the student and not against him or her. When a student says, "Forget it, it doesn't matter to me," "I don't care what you do," or "Nothing ever works out for me," our compassion allows us to see beyond the

student's words and to focus on his or her needs. This involves the sequence of decoding words, identifying feelings, and discovering the original source of stress. The process not only brings logic and understanding to personal confusion, but also it helps the student to accept full responsibility for his or her behavior.

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The staff's ability to provide on-the-spot emotional support to a student in a conflict sends an important message: "I am aware that you are upset and that you are struggling with many feelings and issues. I invite you to talk about them so we can both better understand your point of view." Emotional support is an active and effective way of demonstrating staff kindness.

Empowerment. Often, our discussion with troubled students escalates to a power struggle regarding the issue of authority or who is in control of this relationship. Staff empowerment is a concept that authorizes a student to have full responsibility for choices and behaviors. The act of staff empowerment takes the control or authority issue out of the relationship. It no longer is a concern as to who is conducting the symphony and who is playing assigned music. For example:

> *Corey, an impulsive 8-year-old, is in the crisis room because he refused to follow the gym teacher's directions. Corey is quietly seething with anger. Alex, the crisis teacher, has two other students in his office and asks Corey to please go into the next room and sit down in one of the chairs. Corey puffs out his chest, constricts his eyes, and says adamantly, "I'm not going to do it!" Alex calmly replies, "Corey, I know you are upset about what happened with the gym teacher. Now you have another choice to make. You can refuse to follow my directions, you can fight with me, or even try to run out of this room. You can also choose to make a good choice and walk into the next room. It is really up to you." Corey doesn't move or say anything for the next minute. Then he shouts, "Okay, I'll go but I won't sit down in a chair." "Corey, that's okay with me. It is your choice, but I want to thank you for making a decision that was helpful to you." Corey walks into the other room and shuts the door.*

In this example, Alex was respectful of Corey and empowered him to take control of his behavior. This resulted in Corey's decision to follow Alex's direction and avoid a "no-win" power struggle with staff.

Benign Confrontation. Many of our troubled students seem to be deaf and blind when it comes to hearing or seeing their pattern of self-defeating behavior. Benign confrontation is a sophisticated skill that encourages a student to examine his or her behavior without "boiling over" or running away. This skill depends on three conditions: First, the staff must like the student. Second, the student must have a beginning level of trust in the staff. Third, the staff must have the skill to say what they mean, to mean what they say, and to not say it in a mean way. Most troubled students, I have found, do not respond to any review of their behavior with a resounding cry of "Eureka—I have discovered an important insight into my pattern of self-defeating behavior!" Instead, they often deny the existence of any self-awareness. If a staff person continues to be benign and kindly and asks the student to think about what was presented, the student usually agrees, although it often takes a few days before the student is ready to talk about this problem. For a troubled student to acknowledge his or her pattern of negative behavior takes courage. Benign confrontation is an act of kindness because it respects the student's defenses and self-esteem while also motivating him or her to examine and change his or her behavior.

Personal Commitment. All of us can be kind to troubled students at times, but it is much more difficult to make a long-term commitment to a student. Comments such as ''I'm going to be here for you. There is nothing you can say or do that will make me give up on you. I'm here for the long haul. I'm here until you leave and then I will be part of your memories," are statements of unconditional acceptance. In order for a troubled student to believe and to accept an offer of unconditional acceptance, he or she must also feel it. We can say, "I care about you," but troubled students will *hear* your caring by the tone and pitch of your voice. They will *see* your acceptance by the expression on your face and the look in your eyes. They will be *touched* by your kindness during a crisis when they are treated with respect, listened to, and empowered to be responsible.

These six different acts of staff kindness are identified as a beginning way of translating the concept of staff kindness into specific crisis intervention skills.

5. Are Acts of Kindness Remembered by Troubled Students?

I don't have any empirical data on this question, but I do have some strong convictions. Many of the troubled students with whom I have worked are now 40 years old. Occasionally, I will see one of them on the street or in a mall. Most often they will seek me out by saying, "Dr. Long, I bet you don't know who I am!" I usually agree and, after a few friendly questions, I always ask them what they remembered about our school. An active monologue often occurs. They start to reminisce, recalling the names of staff members, students, and special events I have forgotten. They will describe one incident or person that had special meaning to them. One student surprised me by remembering the times he used to yell and fight with staff until he had to be restrained. I thought he was going to tell me how unpleasant these experiences were, but instead he surprised me and said, "I remember how you, Mr. Tompkins, and Mr. Bissett used to talk to me after I quieted down and tell me that everything was okay. I was a difficult kid, but I want you to know these were some of the nicest times of my life!" The fact that this 41-year-old man could remember these times with such warmth convinces me that staff acts of kindness are always remembered. We may never hear about them, but they are real and important for our students. Adult acts of kindness are so rare in the lives of troubled students, they often become significant life events for them.

6. Are Acts of Staff Kindness Also Beneficial to Staff?

Confucius answered this question when he wrote: "The fragrance of the flower remains in the hands of the giver." Another Chinese proverb underscores the benefits of kindness:

> *If you want happiness for one hour - take a nap.*
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> *If you want happiness for one day - go fishing.*
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> *If you want happiness for one month - get married.*
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> *If you want happiness for one year - inherit a fortune.*
>
> *If you want happiness for a lifetime - be kind to others.*

Emanual Swedenberg, a 17th-century mystic, supplied a more modern view of kindness. He wrote:

> *Kindness is a joy of life. When we do a good deed, there is kindness in everything we think, say, and do.*

A current interpretation of the benefits of kindness was offered by a philosophy professor. He told his class that if they had a choice among selecting beauty, wisdom, power, or kindness, he would urge them to select kindness because

> *Beauty—fades*
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> *Wisdom—changes*
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> *Power—is temporary*
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> *but Kindness—grows even more with time.*

Kindness, I believe, is self-reinforcing to staff. The more we demonstrate it, the more it influences how we think, what we feel, and how we behave. Kindness gives meaning to our lives and makes the lives of others more hopeful and satisfying. Acts of staff kindness are essential to the success of any therapeutic program and are the fundamental reason why troubled students learn to develop trusting relationships with adults. Kindness is the emotional coat that we wrap around a troubled student to provide human warmth and hope.

***Nicholas Long, PhD**, (1929-2022) was founder of the Life Space Crisis Intervention Institute and co-author of the authoritative book, Conflict in the Classroom, now in its seventh edition. He was a professor at American University. Nicholas inspired many professional colleagues who, in turn, touched the lives of thousands of your people throughout the world.*

Reference

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