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The Act of Kindness: A Challenge for Direct Support Professionals

By: Dave Hingsburger

Kindness likely isn't what you think it is.

It is not an attribute or a characteristic of a person. When you hear someone is a 'kind person,' you might think of it as a compliment. But it isn't really. Because it reduces the kindness done to the result from an inherent, born with, trait. And this isn't true. Not remotely so.

Kindness is often an attribute that is attributed to those of us who work with people who have an Intellectual Disability. Automatically, just because we are paid to 'care,' people assume we do 'care,' and that kindness flows from that caring. But then, anyone who has been to a hospital knows that being paid to care and caring are very different things. There is a move away from the word 'care' in reference to the work we do, the term 'Direct Support Professionals' is now the preferred term and, in fact, it's a more precise way to describe what we do. We provide support. That's all we can promise, but 'caring,' which is really a combination of the expectations of the job and the kindness with which that job is done ... that's something that no agency can promise.

We in human services often let ourselves off the introspective hook, "I don't have to examine my motives and motivations, my movements and my methods because – look at my job description – I help people." In fact, we do help people, but does that make us kind? In a word – "NO!" It's also made more difficult to be scrupulously honest with ourselves about what we do because people keep telling us how magnificent we are as people, how extraordinary our hearts must be, just because we work with people who have Intellectual Disabilities. It's easy to believe in our own 'kindness' when everyone else is convinced of it. It's a comfortable place to be sitting in the easy chair satisfied with ourselves – why interrupt that with personal reflection and vigilant scrutiny. Are we who we say we are? Are we who others say we are?

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Are we kind?

Or to put that a more accurate way: Do we choose to act with kindness?

Kindness is a decision.

Kindness is an action.

Kindness is always intentional.

Kindness is what you do, not who you are.

Because of this, kindness is hard work. To spend a whole day being kind in response to those around you, in whatever situation you find yourself is DIFFICULT. We are moved to frustration and anger more naturally than we are to kindness. Further, we are moved to judgment and criticism even more naturally. To be kind is to act against easy emotional pathways, ones that take us away from our better nature and away from our compassion for our fellow human beings. It's easier to share space with our implicit prejudices than it is to share space with compassionate kindness.

So let's begin with a series of acknowledgements.

We aren't always kind.

We aren't always ready to do the work of kindness.

We aren't always prepared to acknowledge our behaviour for what it is.

That's all of us.

For those of you who think, 'What's he talking about, I'm always kind' ... think again. Think of your response to your children who have been naughty, to your spouse who is calling for your attention when you are busy, to your friends who let you down, to your co-workers who sluff off their work and leave it for you sometimes. Now tell me again that you are always, in every circumstance, kind.

This may sound like equating kindness with behaviours that make you a doormat, someone easy to walk over, someone easy to dismiss. There is a difference between kindness and compliance. It is fully possible to stand up for what you believe, and to speak your mind, and demand to be heard, all while being kind. There is sometimes confusion between docility and kindness that cannot be let stand. To be a person who practices kindness, one also must be a person who is able to assert themselves in service to another or in service to oneself.

What Kindness is Not

Giving to Get

Ask any person with a disability you know, and they will be able to tell you stories of 'kindness' thrust upon them without their permission and often without even their need. This 'kindness' is performance. It's doing for another in order to get recognition from others, or in order to feel good about oneself. Kind acts are never done with the intention of gain, in any form.

This is hard because, if you use some simple behavioural principles, kindness done for recognition by others or by self is very reinforcing. I help this man in a wheelchair and then people see me as helpful and kind. More deeply though, I help this woman with the walker, and I momentarily relieve my sense of personal futility (or sadness or grief or whatever other emotion) – I feel good about myself. So the behaviour can be both positively and negatively reinforced.

Making Your Life Easier

“Here, let me help with that.” Seeing a teacher, a parent, or a staff kneel down at the end of the day to help a person with a disability tie their shoe is seeing someone engaged in an act of kindness, right? Well, maybe, but maybe not. Maybe what’s happening is that someone is helping, under the guise of kindness, in order to get it done and to get going. Maybe kindness would be letting the person struggle to finish. Maybe kindness would be giving the space for the person to grow. Maybe kindness would be doing nothing at all. This is a tough kindness to see, and it is often interpreted as callousness or lack of caring. But, you may not be seeing the struggle that’s going on inside where the impulse to help, to interfere, is gargantuan.

Nothing

A woman with a disability posts on Facebook about her experience being completely disregarded as a potential employee when being interviewed for a job. She says that she knew, the moment she rolled through the door, she was not getting the job. The HR director closed a file folder upon her entry, and her interview was over in a few minutes when all previous candidates were interviewed for nearly half an hour. She writes about the unemployment rates for people with disabilities. She writes about poverty. It’s a powerful post.

She took the post down a few hours later because she was so angered at what she called ‘the kindness of nothing.’ People responded, lots and lots of people responded. Most sending ‘virtual hugs’ or ‘prayers and happy thoughts’ or ‘sad face’ emojis. She knew that every single person who posted a response thought that they were being kind. But, “They sent me nothing. NOTHING.” When I asked her what she had wanted, she didn’t even have to think for more than a second. “Action,” she said.

She wanted people to do something. Pledge to talk to their own HR departments and ask about their policies regarding hiring those with disabilities. “If there are no people with disabilities in your workplace, there are exclusionary practices,” she said. Another thing she wanted was for people to promise to write to their elected leaders and ask about policies regarding workplace access for people with disabilities.

“I didn’t expect anyone to fix the problem, but I wanted someone to say that they would do something.” Thought and prayers, even when offered in a well-meaning way, are nothing. Words are hollow and empty when they aren’t connected to actions.

Roadblocks to Kindness for Direct Support Professionals

- 1) Hierarchy and Power: When you are given power over another human being, slowly, over time, their feelings begin to matter less than your own, their opinions aren’t viewed

as necessary to the process of their lives, their desires take second place to your own. Power is addictive and can lead to corrosive behaviours.

- 2) Being on guard, always checking your power and privilege is mandatory for self-management of who you become and what you do as a result.
- 3) Devolution: Terry Pratchett, a brilliant writer who had a clear-eyed view of the state of being human said: “Evil begins when you begin to treat people as things. This is the danger that we face when working with a minority group who is often devalued by society. Those who wipe the bottoms of *the people* they serve are very different than those who wipe the bottoms of *the bodies* they serve. It’s easier to thingify a person than you might imagine. The fact that the word ‘thingify’ exists is scary in and of itself.”

So What is Kindness and What Does it Look Like For Direct Support Professionals

Given that acts of helping aren’t necessarily acts of kindness, what is kindness when helping is our job?

- 1) Kindness is intentional: Kindness takes work. A lot of work. It means being on guard all day and every day to your power, and to the humanity of the people you serve. It means that you make a thousand thousand decisions every day regarding how you will act and react, and think and process, and it will affect the tone you use, the words you choose, the strength of your grasp, and the set of your shoulders. It is possible to choose kindness even when angered or annoyed. Kindness doesn’t mean that you become some kind of super-human niceness machine – that’s neither possible nor desirable. It means though that, for example, when speaking up to a co-worker in anger, you make decisions about the words you will and will not use – racist, sexist, homophobic, fat phobic, shaming words just don’t belong in your discourse, even when angry. You can decide that your anger will always be issue focused, not person focused. When you are annoyed, you are most probably annoyed by a situation, rather than by the other people involved, stick to what’s bothering you. Name calling and shaming isn’t what kind people do. This is why deciding to be kind all day is so exhausting, it means several things but one of them is governing our mouths, our manner, and our demeanor. Yikes.
- 2) Kindness Involves Permission and Participation: The urge to help and the need for help are different things. When pushing up a hill, a wheelchair user may need their staff to walk behind them to block people from helping. They just might want to do it on their own; they just may want to feel the thrill of making it on their own. People seeing struggle may see that as a call for help, it may not be. Staff report that people think they are horrible because they aren’t “helping” when in fact they are. Kindness never violates the rule of permission. If the person doesn’t want help, it’s best to create space and time for them to be able to do it on their own. Or if the individual doesn’t want a particular kind of help, what kind of help would they like. They may brush your hand away but welcome gestures or instructions. For those who work with people who have significant disabilities who do not communicate in traditional ways, permission or participation matters. If you are going to put someone’s coat on, get to eye level, and tell them what you are going to do, “I’m going to put your coat on now.” They may not be able to give permission in an

obvious way, but you can be obvious in your intention. Speaking to the person first means that you are treating someone as a person first, not a thing to be clothed, but a person to be involved and informed.

- 3) Kindness is bone deep: Have you ever been treated by someone who is ‘acting’ kind – you know – someone whose kindness is kind of surface, and shallow, and insincere? It feels awful to be on the blunt end of that kind of interaction. It feels patronizing and diminishing. There’s the key – kindness never diminishes another. By my doing what I do, I build you up, I support you, I do not tear you down, I do not make you less. Again, this is why kindness is such work, it’s an intentional decision to go deep into yourself to grab onto the best tools you have in the shed where you keep the tools of the heart. Compassion is a tool. Understanding is a tool. Gentleness is a tool. When these tools are used, drawn from the deepest part of you, you can rest assured that what you are doing will result in everyone benefiting, even yourself.
- 4) Kindness Listens: Everyone communicates. Some with words. Some with actions. Some with shoulders. Kindness requires the willingness to listen, the willingness to listen requires the creation of time and space, the creation of time and space requires that person-centered priorities are set. They call it active listening because listening isn’t passive, it’s full engagement. Eyes are as important as ears when it comes to listening. Heart is as important as mind when another’s voice is being heard. Listening involves setting yourself and your opinions aside, it means pushing all your preconceptions and ideas and thoughts far enough away to create a space in your mind to hear, just hear, what someone is communicating. Listening means that we are passing leadership and power over another, and the implication that we are willing to follow and to take a pass on power.

Summary and a Challenge:

Some of you might have found this article offensive. One of the people who proofed this piece said, “I disagree, I believe I am a kind person.” Well, disagreement is okay, but I think we can all agree that kindness makes a better world, and better relationships, and better mental health. I think we benefit to our core from the practice of kindness.

So here’s the challenge, on November 13th the world celebrates kindness. It’s “World Kindness Day.” The challenge is to take that day on intentionally, to act kind, all day, in every situation, in every mood, in every interaction. Take the day to really work the kindness muscle (because as a result of being an action, being something you do, we all have kindness muscles) all day.

All day.

See if it makes a difference. Further, if you do find a difference or discover something interesting about yourself or others around you as a result of this experiment, write us at the journal. We would love to hear from you.

About the author

Dave Hingsburger, M.Ed., is the Director of Clinical and Educational Services at Vita Community Living Services. Dave lectures internationally and has published several books and articles in reference to disability. He provides training to staff, parents, and people with disabilities regarding sexuality, abuse prevention, self-esteem, and behavioural approaches. He has developed 'Disability-Informed Therapy' as part of his work towards creating safe spaces for people with disabilities to live and work.

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