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I used to live not far from Abbey Road in London. When occasionally I drove along it, I was always super alert as I approached a certain zebra crossing. This crossing was immediately outside the famous Abbey Road Studios where the Beatles recorded most of their iconic albums, including of course, in 1969, *Abbey Road*. The reason for my caution was that there was invariably a group of tourists on the crossing – one of them barefooted, none of them paying heed to the traffic – who were intent on reproducing the shot of John, Ringo, Paul and George from the album cover, while a friend or passer-by took a photo of their homage to the Fab Four.

The Beatles are of course among the most famous people who have ever lived – feted and adored by millions. But the grand monument, in the middle of a junction close to the zebra crossing, has not been erected to honour their achievements. This monument is perhaps 18 feet tall and built of grey stone. On one of its plinths, there is a bronze sculpture of a muse playing the harp. On the other, there is a copper roundel depicting a distinguished, bearded face of a man in noble profile. Two grand lamp standards stand guard on either side of the monument. Who could warrant such a lavish memorial? And why was it erected?

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The monument is to a Victorian sculptor called Edward Onslow Ford. So that's the who part. But I've always found the why part particularly heartwarming. Because the reason Onslow Ford's memory was marked in so striking a way was that he was so popular with his students and other sculptors for his 'charming disposition' that they raised a considerable sum to build this large memorial to him after his death in 1901. Letters of condolence to his widow in his archive housed at the Henry Moore Foundation speak of his great kindness. The inscription on the memorial reads: 'Erected by his friends and admirers. To thine own self be true.'

There are, I think, important lessons from the story of Onslow Ford, who it seems did succeed in being true to himself. First, it shows that we do value kindness to some extent – enough in exceptional cases to erect monuments to people who personify it. But second, it shows we perhaps don't value it enough. Compared with the Beatles, Onslow Ford's lasting impact on our culture is fairly minimal, so despite his memorial, my guess is that soon he will be pretty much forgotten, while the Beatles will surely be remembered for decades (even centuries?) to come. Genius and achievement are rightly revered. I'm not for a moment suggesting we should devalue these attributes. But I am suggesting that we should, like Onslow Ford's friends, notice and treasure the humbler virtue of kindness more than we sometimes do.

To this end, *The Keys to Kindness* makes the argument for taking kindness more seriously and valuing it more deeply. We are kinder than we might think, but we could be kinder still – with enormous benefits for our personal mental health and well-being, as well as for society, the economy and the environment. Using the latest psychological evidence from around

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the world, and drawing on a new and unique study, I will demonstrate that kindness helps not just others, but us too.

Being kind is not always easy though. The way the world is currently constructed can lead us to be tough on ourselves and on others. Schools, universities and workplaces are in some ways kinder places than they once were. Gone are the days when it was OK to throw a typewriter at someone (when I was new to a radio newsroom, older colleagues would tell me tales of such events). Gone are the days when children were caned for failing to remember their times tables. But across society, a premium is still put on personal achievement and individual success, often at the expense of others and sometimes through developing a hard and ruthless streak in ourselves. The idea can still get into us that to be kind is to be weak and that weakness means you lose out. I will be challenging that notion, backed up by extensive evidence that we all benefit from greater cooperation and compassion, and that being kind and empathic certainly isn't an impediment to success or even acclaim. More than that, the more kindness there is, the more the world will benefit.

I will also look into the tricky question of how to define what kindness is.

For instance, I wonder how many of these statements relate to you?

- I think it's right to give everyone a chance
- I find it easy to forgive
- I share things I would rather keep for myself
- I have surprised another person with an act of kindness
- I smile at strangers
- I've done something that upset me to help a friend

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Don't worry if you don't identify with all of these statements. They represent some of the different types of kindness, so you may be more inclined towards tolerance or empathy, but less inclined towards taking deliberate actions to be kind or avoiding acts which might be unkind. Most likely, you have acted in all these ways on some occasions, but not on others. You are probably a kind person, but not all the time and you show your kindness in different ways at different times.

Kindness, you see, is not simple. Nor is it just one thing. It is multifaceted, hard to pin down and often misunderstood. I once offended the widower of a brilliant researcher by telling him that despite only having met his wife on a few short occasions I could tell what a really kind person she was. I meant it as a true compliment, but he felt the praise was rather bland and patronising, downplaying his wife's professional achievements. His reaction was perhaps understandable, particularly given the routine devaluation of women's accomplishments in traditionally male arenas. But even so, it was a shame – an instance of the attribute of kindness being underappreciated in our culture. I'd like to live in a world where the greatest thing you could say about a person is that they were kind.

Seven Keys to Kindness

In this book, I explore seven keys to kindness, some of which may seem obvious to you, others less so. No one key is more important than any other; instead they fit together to provide a full picture of all aspects of kindness which we need to consider in order to make the world a kinder place.

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In Chapter 1, I start by exploring the fact – often underappreciated – that there is a lot of kindness in the world already. Yes, that’s right. Humanity outweighs inhumanity – we just need to open our eyes to it and not be misled by the negativity that inevitably predominates in the news and on social media. Then in Chapter 2 I’ll be showing that kindness is good for you, the giver, as well as for your beneficiaries. In fact, it’s a win/win/win – for us as individuals, for others and for the wider world. In this chapter and the next, I’ll show that people who act in kind ways benefit from their kindness – and I hope to convince you there is nothing wrong with that and that the advantages that accrue to you don’t undermine the impact of your kindness on others. Then, I’ll swerve slightly to discuss one of the big issues of our times: social media. In a ‘half-chapter’ entitled: ‘Social media is full of kindness (OK, not full, but it is there)’, I’ll argue that while Twitter and Facebook and other platforms can be full of abuse and hatred, that is only half the story – even in these bear pits, kindness and positivity still flourish. In the next full chapter, I’ll turn to a deeper exploration of the issue of whether you can be kind *and* be a winner in life. I hope this isn’t a spoiler if I tell you now that the answer is a clear YES. I’ll show that kindness is not soft, it’s not weak; indeed, it can be our hidden strength.

Then comes the difficult question of how to be kinder. The fifth key to kindness is to take the trouble to understand other people’s opinions and perspectives if we are to act kindly, but also that we should choose our moment. There is a time and a place for empathy. In the sixth chapter, I will argue that we don’t have to confine ourselves to those small random acts of kindness that we hear so much about. We can think big. Most of us will never need to show huge

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bravery, but we're all capable of heroism and we can plan in advance for what might be a once in a lifetime opportunity to save a life. Also, thinking about extreme kindness can help us to be kinder in everyday life. Chapter 7 is a bit different because it doesn't concern kindness to others, but to ourselves. Self-care and self-compassion, I'll argue, need not slip into self-indulgence and selfishness, and done in the right way can have huge benefits for our mental health. We need to develop a true tenderness towards ourselves and our failings, so that we can protect our well-being, and that puts us in a better position to help others.

I wrap things up with a prescription for kindness, with tips on how to put all this research into practice in order to be a kinder person and to build a kinder world. Here you can choose which suggestions might work in your life and I hope it will prompt you into thinking up your own ideas for acting in a more kindly way.

Throughout this book I will draw on hard evidence and proven strategies published in scientific journals. During the last two decades a topic which had been neglected within psychology and neuroscience has been studied in depth by experienced scientists. I stress this because it would be easy to dismiss a book about kindness as slushy, sentimental and lacking in rigour. The opposite is true.

The Kindness Test

I will also be making extensive use of brand new findings from the world's largest study of its type into kindness – the Kindness Test, on which I worked with colleagues at the

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University of Sussex, a leading centre for kindness research. The research was led by Professor Robin Banerjee, sometimes nicknamed (by me anyway) ‘the professor of kindness’. I launched the study on the BBC shows and podcasts I present – *All in the Mind* on BBC Radio 4 and *Health Check* on the BBC World Service.

In the Kindness Test we invited people to complete a series of online questionnaires, asking questions on everything from their personality and their mental health, to how kind they are in everyday life and what proportion of an unexpected cash windfall they might be prepared to give away. We were staggered by the number of people who chose to take part – 60,227 people from 144 countries. The analysis of this unprecedented data set gives us a richer understanding of how kindness really works in real life, and what it is that prevents from us from being kinder.

At the outset, the Kindness Test illustrated neatly how many types of kindness exist. When asked to list the ways in which they were kind, participants gave a huge number of examples, but here are the top five:

TOP FIVE WAYS PEOPLE TOLD US THEY WERE KIND

1. I help people when they ask
2. I don't mind doing favours for friends
3. I open doors to let people through
4. I help strangers pick up things they have dropped
5. I have concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me

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What is striking is how everyday, even mundane, these actions are. They aren't huge acts of generosity or self-sacrifice. In fact, 'I don't mind doing favours for friends' might even sound a little grudging. But these small instances of kindness are happening all around us, often unnoticed, all the time. They may be small drops, but together they make an ocean. Given this, it is perhaps not surprising – though still heartening – that the study showed that kindness is very common and widespread. Three quarters of people said they received kindness from close friends or family 'quite often' or 'nearly all the time'. Fifty-nine per cent had received an act of kindness within the last day, and a quarter of those said it was in the last hour.

In the questionnaire, we also asked people to fill in a scale which rated their levels of kindness. Now, of course, we had to trust people to be honest about the kind acts they carry out, but the range of responses we received suggests that people are prepared to admit to *not* being especially kind as well as the opposite, so I think we can take people at their word and regard the scoring system as pretty robust.

The findings are interesting, particularly when it comes to categorising people who gained higher than average kindness scores. First, women and religious people report carrying out slightly more kind acts than average. But personality made much more of a difference. People who are extraverted, open to new experiences and agreeable, both give and, strikingly, receive more kindness. Value systems are also an important factor, more important than religion. Those who say they value benevolence and universalism are kinder on average than those who value achievement and power. But fear not if you are an ambitious, reserved, irritable, agnostic man. This

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doesn't mean you would automatically score low on kindness. These findings reflect what happens on average within a large group, so it's perfectly possible for a grumpy, introverted man, who strives for success and doesn't believe in God to still score very high on kindness. (Maybe you know a few?) However, the average scores still tell us something significant about who at the group level is most likely to be kind.

Another thing we asked in the Kindness Test was for people to list the words they associated with kindness. The top five in this case were:

TOP FIVE WORDS PEOPLE ASSOCIATED WITH KINDNESS

1. Empathy
2. Care
3. Helping
4. Thoughtfulness
5. Compassion

These are not, of course, particularly unexpected words and indeed they pretty much match how researchers in the field have conceptualised kindness. Within academia, however, there is considerable debate over precise terms and definitions. Yes, even people studying kindness find plenty to argue about, especially if talking about what constitutes *pure* kindness.

The Kindness Test is again helpful here, because it allows me to take a 'trust the people' approach. Of course, there's considerable, even great, kindness in steeling yourself to tell

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somebody something that's hard to hear, but which will help them in the long run. Of course, some kindness involves self-sacrifice, even pain. And then there are cases of long-considered altruism such as the donation of a kidney to a stranger. Or there are the spur of the moment heroic acts where a huge personal risk is taken and a life is saved. But at the same time, the everyday acts recorded in the test – the many thousands of cups of tea made, the hot baths run, the compliments given, the thank you cards sent, the smiles in shops, the dropped tickets handed back to their owners – are commonly understood as kindness and should be appreciated as such.

And in practice, there is a lot of overlap between the various types of kindness. A kind act can include heroism or gratitude or sympathy or love or care or compassion – or a combination of any of these. Being kind to strangers, regardless of the circumstances, is self-sacrificing in one sense, yet it brings pleasure to a person who acts in this way. Kindness might involve taking opportunities to be kind only when they present themselves, or actively seeking out every opportunity to act in kindly ways towards others – through volunteering, for example. Sometimes kindness involves seeing another person's perspective and viewing all their actions with compassion, but it might also involve intervening to tell a person that they are acting with disregard for others. Sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind, but of course you can be kind in gentler ways too. And while it might seem you can never be too kind, there is truth in the old saying that you can kill with kindness. Kindness doesn't flow from indulging all behaviours or always turning the other cheek.

In this book I'm thinking of kindness as something that's

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done with the intention of benefitting someone else. Note the use of the word ‘intention’, because I’m sure we can all recall situations where we meant well, but our kindness didn’t quite go as planned.

As well as asking participants in the Kindness Test about the kind acts that they carry out themselves, we also asked them about the kind acts they witnessed and where they took place.

TOP FIVE PLACES WHERE PEOPLE SEE KIND ACTS TAKING PLACE

1. At home
2. In medical settings
3. At work
4. In green spaces
5. In shops

The place where people told us they are least likely to see kind acts was online, which might not surprise you, given the bile and hatred we see on social media (although there is of course kindness and support there too – see more in Chapter 3½). But I was intrigued to see that the other places where kind acts were rarely witnessed were on public transport and in the street. The reason I was surprised about trains and buses is that I’ve been keeping a diary of the moments of kindness I observe when I’m out in public places. Again and again I see pushchairs carried up steps, seats given up for older people and dropped items returned to their owners. (Incidentally, alongside more results from the Kindness Test

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I will be including some excerpts from my ‘Kindness Diary’ throughout the book and urging you to keep such a diary yourself.)

In the study, people were also asked to recall the last act of kindness that someone had done for them, and the last kind act they themselves had performed. Spreadsheets don’t usually tend to have a big emotional impact on me, but I was genuinely moved, and will admit to the odd tear in my eye as I scrolled through thousands of short entries, each describing a moment of kindness between two people. There’s evidence that we feel a warm glow when we do something nice for someone else – this glow shows up in brain scans. I definitely experienced such a glow just reading about the many kind acts and so between every chapter I’ve included a selection of these sentences, so that you too can share in this heartening experience.

It’s good to receive as well as give

Before concluding this introduction, I want to touch on an area that is sometimes neglected when we consider kindness. Perhaps because it seems so obvious and therefore harder to find funding for, far less research time is devoted to the benefits to the recipient of a kind act, than to the giver. And yet we know from our own experience that being on the receiving end of kindness makes us feel cared for, cherished, heard, valued and above all, connected with other human beings. Those connections have a huge effect on our well-being. Psychological research demonstrates the difference that kindness and empathy can make to the way we develop as

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children, to our relationships throughout our lives and the way we cope in difficult times.¹ Kindness does have a positive impact on us. Here are just a few examples:

- Both adults and children rate their relationships as more satisfying if their parents or their partners are able to see things from their point of view.
- Likewise, people who feel kindly towards their partners are likely to have closer, more trusting relationships in the years to come.
- People who are empathic are less likely to worry obsessively when they are unhappy with something their partner has done, and more likely to forgive them.
- When students are asked to rate their lecturers, they value the lecturers' concern and consideration nine times more than their competence.
- Children with cancer experience less subjective pain if their parents respond empathically to them.²

It's obvious really, but it needs saying: we like it when people are kind to us.

A tale of two journalists

Twenty years ago or more, two famous journalists had their leaving do's at around the same time. One had a lavish party at a London club, with fine wine and fancy catering, all paid for by their employer. Hundreds attended, including the great and the good. Speeches were given lauding this journalist's achievements, which were considerable, but in

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huddles around the room many of the guests spent their time swapping tales of how awful this man had been to work with.

By contrast, the other journalist organised his own leaving party in a much humbler setting. There was a pay bar and guests chipped in for a buffet. No bigwigs came, but despite the event being on a Saturday night, people in their twenties, receptionists and cleaners, cheerfully turned up to give this sixty-something a good send-off. The talk all night was not of this man's professional achievements, though again they were considerable, but of what a thoroughly nice man he was.

I know, when the time comes, which leaving do I would rather have, and I hope that through reading this book you will wish to be remembered for being a kind person above all. For if that does turn out to be true, you will have enjoyed a happier and more fulfilled life, as well as a generous and giving one – and incidentally, there is no reason why it should hold you back from achieving other goals. You can be a top journalist – or even a famous rock star – and be kind to people at the same time. Kindness doesn't hold you back, it sets you free.

In an era of highly polarised opinion, in which even the phrase #bekind is at times weaponised on social media, and when the world faces such serious threats as armed conflicts, a refugee crisis, climate change and further pandemics, there is an urgent need for greater cooperation at the global, regional and societal level. And with anxiety, stress and depression on the rise, at a personal level too we need more focus on compassion and care. But for either of these things to happen, we need to recognise, appreciate and value

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kindness. Kindness helps us to forge connections with other human beings. It shouldn't be seen as incidental in our lives. It is a fundamental part of human nature. I hope, therefore, that *The Keys to Kindness* will unlock some of the mysteries of kindness and open doors to the ways in which we can all be kinder to each other, to the world and to ourselves.

LAST ACT OF KINDNESS RECEIVED

The Kindness Test

*My friend tagged me in a post on Facebook describing me as pure
sunshine – made me very happy.*

*I took my dog to a championship show, then struggled to erect my
gazebo as it was very windy weather and three people, all women,
rushed to help me.*

*My adult daughter painted my aging toenails before my
niece's wedding.*

*My husband cleared up the pee our new puppy had done on the floor,
even though we had an agreement that I'd do it.*

*I was unable to join friends in Cornwall for a week's holiday.
They brought me back a Cornish goodie bag. Lovely thought.*

My girlfriend kissed me. I'm really quite hideous.

*My bird table fell to pieces and a friend, without telling me, made
a new one from rescued wood which he treated and painted.*

*A friend listened to me telling a difficult story at length and gave
advice and support.*

Someone held a gate open so I could run through.