

Why it's cool to be kind

A new book claims performing a selfless act every day for three weeks can make you a happier person. **LIZZIE CATT** puts it to the test

YOU have to be ruthless to cope with modern life and while 12 years in London have turned me into a mean city girl, I've never been a Pollyanna. When I was younger my father would proclaim in exasperation: "Elizabeth Catt you have battery acid for blood," after one of my particularly vicious teenage tantrums.

Urban survival means you never make eye contact or smile at a stranger, let alone talk to a fellow commuter. While I've never used a panic alarm on a friendly tourist asking for directions, I once deployed a rolled-up copy of the Big Issue to swat a rude man cramming himself into a crowded train.

Yet according to David Hamilton, author of *Why Kindness Is Good For You*, struggling through life with a snarl on your face isn't the way to happiness.

He claims kindness is not only beneficial to those on the receiving end but also to the person dishing it out.

Studies referred to in the book claim kindness changes the brain and makes us 25 per cent happier. To prove it he sets a 21-day challenge. The idea is simple and the promise alluring. Perform one act of simple kindness a day for 21 days to reap these benefits.

So as the nights darkened and the prospect of another dreary winter loomed I decided now was the perfect time to transform myself into a little ray of sunshine. I started day one with a grand gesture, sending a sniffing, cold-inflicted member of my team home early. Kind? Any kinder and I'd be the Dalai Lama.

Day two involved a trip to London Zoo. There I let a harassed woman with three under-fours take my place in the



epic queue for the toilets. This act was repaid instantly as it became obvious one of her charges would almost certainly have had an accident over the floor and probably on my favourite suede trainers if delayed another minute.

One Sunday I arrived at my parents' house for dinner with presents, although I'm not sure giving my mother an anti-ageing cream can be considered an act of kindness.

At work I made tea and once even brought in biscuits. Granted, I ate most of them myself but it's not my fault others were slow off the mark.

Instinct told me a spontaneous gesture trumped a contrived one, although sometimes buying gifts was the only act I had time for.

If my flatmate was confused by my presents, including a mini lint roller and a tin of her favourite beans with veggie sausages, she was too polite to mention it.

The acts of kindness that felt the best, however, weren't the ones involving presents. Persuading a single male friend to talk to a woman over dinner and making sure he called her was fun and rewarding.

The satisfying feeling of volunteering to take the cramped seat on a long and bumpy car journey made up for a numb behind.

My only problem was it made me feel guilty for treating acts of

kindness like some kind of currency to buy happiness. I knew that in many cases I would have or should have been behaving that way, whether or not I was on a 21-day mission.

Sometimes I would tip a taxi driver despite him getting horribly lost or give up my seat on the bus and think, "that can be my good deed for the day". Some days I would struggle. It was difficult to be nice on my birthday when friends and family were going out of their way to be wonderful to me. I just made sure I said thanks a lot and got a round of drinks in.

My clearest indication of how a little kindness goes a long way came during a holiday to Marrakesh in Morocco. A mix-up with the hotel led to me booking another one as back-up I subsequently didn't need.

I assumed I would be charged £90 for a no-show but my act of kindness for that day was to contact the manager of the family-run property to let him know he could release the room. I thought no more about it but when I returned home I received an email from him thanking me and saying he would not be charging me the cancellation fee.

It's not easy to say if being kind for 21 days has made me exactly 25 per cent happier but it certainly has been a tonic. Shaking hands with a restaurant owner after a stand-off about the bill instead of muttering darkly;

plastering a big smile on my face when I really wanted to curl my lip and presenting friends and family with silly presents all felt good.

It continues to feel good. Any guilt I harboured about assigning kind deeds to a sneaky secret mental dossier of niceness just goes to show that deep down I know very well that this type of behaviour should be part of everyday life.

Just don't ask me not to swat rude, pushy men on the train. They've got to learn somehow.

● *To order Why Kindness Is Good For You by David Hamilton (Hay House, £9.99) with free UK delivery, call 0871 988 8367 (10p per minute from BT landlines) with your card details, send a cheque payable to Express Newspapers to: The Express Bookshop, PO Box 200, Falmouth TR11 4WJ or order via expressbookshop.co.uk*



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10 EASY WAYS TO SHOW PEOPLE THAT YOU REALLY CARE



FRIENDLY ADVICE: Treat a pal to a coffee

- 1** Pay someone a compliment.
- 2** Send a card to a teacher and tell them how they influenced your life.
- 3** Buy some food for a homeless person.
- 4** Search out inspirational or funny videos on YouTube and send them to someone who needs them.
- 5** Visit an elderly person and take time to listen to their stories.
- 6** Do a chore they hate doing for someone.
- 7** Offer to go out and do the shopping for someone who is unable to do it themselves.
- 8** Phone someone up on their birthday and sing Happy Birthday down the line to them.
- 9** Buy lunch or dinner for someone who is short of money.
- 10** If you're getting a coffee for someone in the office, offer to get one for your other colleagues or just surprise someone with a coffee on your return.





PRESENT CHARMS:
Lizzie liked giving gifts

