

My month of being

More irritable than charitable? Writer Ruth Tierney, from Tunbridge Wells, Kent, used to be – until she tried a new instruction manual...

Being benevolent for a whole four weeks sounds like a tough call, doesn't it? It's up there with running a marathon or turning down chocolate cake. But it can be done, according to Dr David Hamilton, author of new book *Why Kindness Is Good For You* (Hay House, £9.99) – and, what's more, it makes sense to do it.

'We all know that kindness is beneficial for those who receive it. But it's also good for the giver,' says Dr Hamilton. 'Acts of kindness make us happier and healthier, they relieve symptoms of depression, and they even help us live longer, healthier lives – there are scientific studies backing all of this up.' Sounds sensible in principle. But, in reality, life often gets in the way – it's hard to be nice when someone's cut you up on the motorway or your toddler's screaming blue murder in the supermarket. So, to see whether 24-7 kindness really is doable, I decided to try living by Dr Hamilton's methods for a month.

Ruth's kindness diary

WEEK ONE

■ **I wouldn't say I'm naturally unkind**, but as an only child, I sometimes verge on the selfish. A stressful job as a freelance writer plus a busy home life doesn't help with the halo either. When I'm rushing around working to deadlines, the thought of buying a homeless person a sandwich or paying a friend a compliment doesn't enter my head. But, according to Dr Hamilton, I need to make time for exactly these types of small acts, as the rewards to health and wellbeing can be far-reaching. He also stresses that kindness should always be genuine, with 'the intent to improve someone's day, and with no expectation of return'.

HERE'S WHAT I DID...

■ **Daily 'loving kindness' meditation.** A US study at The University of North Carolina found that seven weeks of this Buddhist meditation increased positive emotions. Dr Hamilton gave me the following

instructions, 'Relax and breathe slowly. Then say out loud or in your head, 'May you be well. May you be happy. May you be at ease.' Do this for all of your loved ones, naming them individually. Move on to friends, colleagues, acquaintances. Next comes the hard part: move on to your enemies.

I run through family and friends before stumbling upon those I'm not so fond of. It feels fake to be wishing them well, and I leave them out of future meditation as just thinking about certain former friends/ex-boyfriends makes me mad!

■ **Spend money on others.**

It doesn't have to be much, says Dr Hamilton. I stop to give buskers and homeless people spare change, when normally I'd rush on by, and splash out double the usual amount on a friend's birthday present. The look on her face when she unwraps the silk scarf makes my day.

■ **Stroke a pet,** have a massage or give a daily hug,



kind

advises Dr Hamilton. These all increase the brain's production of the hormone oxytocin, which makes us more loving and generous. I simply up the amount of attention I give my Scottish terrier, Carlos. My husband Chris got the odd extra hug, too!

WEEK TWO

■ **Volunteer (but not too much).** A couple of hours a week is the ideal amount to achieve a 'helper's high' – any more and it'll become a chore, according to a study by the Australian National University. I sign up to mentor vulnerable children at a primary school for an hour a week. From the beginning of the next school term, I'll be helping with their literacy. At 33, I don't have children of my own and would never have thought of doing this before, but now I can't wait to get started. I also volunteer to help a struggling theatre with its marketing material.

■ **Wear a 'complaint-free' wristband.** Dr Hamilton encourages us to go without complaining, criticising or unfairly judging someone or something for 21 days – you have to move the band to the other wrist every time you slip up. This is the toughest challenge so far, because I love nothing more than a good moan. Within the first hour of wearing the red band, I've swapped wrists five times! It definitely

makes me stop and think. I'm about to criticise the ham-fisted way Chris is washing-up (pans before glasses!), when I notice the band and bite my tongue. By the end of the week, I'm barely switching wrists, and I feel happier for it. I never realised what a toxic residue bad-mouthing leaves.

■ **Keep a gratitude journal.** 'Recognising everything others have contributed to our life makes us more thoughtful and better people to be around,' explains Dr Hamilton. According to a study by the University of California and the University of Miami, people felt 25 per cent happier after keeping a weekly gratitude journal for ten weeks. So, every week, write down five things that have happened for which you're thankful. After sitting chewing my pen for a while, I soon get into the flow. My journal includes things like, 'the flowers my husband bought me out of the blue,' and 'the support and friendship of my parents'. It makes me focus on the good stuff, rather than dwelling on the bad.

WEEK THREE

■ **Watch a 'kind' film.** 'Kindness is contagious,' says Dr Hamilton. 'Being around nice people rubs off on us – as does seeing them on TV.' He suggests watching a feelgood movie, so I borrow *Amélie* from the library. It's about a Parisian waitress's quest to improve the lives of others with spontaneous acts of kindness. I can't help feeling moved, but many of the scenes are too whimsical to recreate in real life. Instead, I draw inspiration from my saintly sister-in-law Nichola, who bought hot chocolate and a pair of gloves

EASY WAYS TO BE KIND...

- Take a friend for lunch.
- Buy an extra parking ticket and leave it on the meter for the next person.
- Send a thank you card to an old school teacher.
- Offer to carry an elderly person's shopping.
- Hold a door open for someone.
- Give a family member a hug for no reason.
- Tell a shop assistant or waitress they're doing a great job.

for a Big Issue seller last winter. I follow her lead, and buy tea and a cake for a homeless person. This is met with a surprised smile and a heartfelt thanks.

■ **Do yoga.** 'When we take care of ourselves, we have more energy, confidence and conviction,' says Dr Hamilton. 'Kindness towards others becomes more effortless.' He suggests yoga, so I sign up for weekly classes. The teacher, Brigid, encourages us to be kind to ourselves by listening to our bodies rather than pushing them. I'm not very flexible, so allow myself to do easier variations of the more complex positions. A few Sun Salutations later, and I leave feeling uplifted.

■ **Write a letter of gratitude to someone who's made a positive difference in your life.** Like many people, I take my nearest and dearest for granted – no one more so than my husband. 'When we practise gratitude, our level of positivity rises to ensure the survival of a relationship and allows many couples to experience a new

honeymoon period,' explains Dr Hamilton. This kind of thing is completely out of my comfort zone, so I write Chris a gratitude list, rather than a letter. Still, it seems to do the trick – he looks touched as he reads it. It makes me realise that I need to tell him how I feel.

WEEK FOUR

■ **Pay someone a compliment.** I go out of my way to praise friends, telling them how lovely they look, but most reply with, 'Are you kidding?'. Still, hopefully the compliments will have sunk in on some level! I also comment on a job well done when a cobbler fixes my handbag strap, giving him a £2 tip, which he's delighted with.

■ **Stimulate the vagus nerve,** which is responsible for a person's heart rate, and also, studies show, their capacity for compassion. You can do this by holding your breath for a few seconds, coughing, or dipping your face in cold water. I start splashing ice water on my face every morning, and while it's invigorating, I'm not sure it's making me any kinder!

■ **Count your acts of kindness.** A study of 119 Japanese women showed that when they counted up the good things they'd done that week, they all became happier, and 20 per cent were much happier. I add up the little things I've done in the last seven days, and realise that kindness is almost becoming second nature. I'm opening doors for strangers, being more tolerant of people's foibles, and showing more patience with shop assistants and commuters. Who'd have thought it?

Verdict

'I'm not going to pretend this month has been a walk in the park. For the first two weeks I had to keep reminding myself to be kind – it takes time, practice and patience. I found some of Dr Hamilton's suggestions hard to fit into everyday life, such as the loving kindness meditation, which took forever and a day to do. But as the month wore on, I did find my behaviour was slowly changing. Making it my mission

to improve another person's day was rewarding, thought-provoking and often fun. Friends seem genuinely impressed by the volunteering I've signed up for, and I've had noticeably less rows with Chris this month – here's hoping I'm a nicer person to be around now! Of course, old habits die hard and only yesterday I beeped at a bus that cut me up in my car! But this experiment has shown me that little actions produce big rewards – for the giver and the receiver of kindness.

What's more, all of the resulting positivity zapped my stress levels. Situations and people that would usually get my hackles up are, instead, given benefit of the doubt. Practising kindness even boosted my energy – I'd never realised how emotionally draining complaining can be. I may not be meditating and writing gratitude journals on a daily basis, but I'll carry on with the volunteer work and yoga, and do my best to do as many small acts of kindness as possible.'