

Video 5: Module Kindness

If I only had five seconds to talk about the biggest secret to becoming happier, I would probably talk about practicing acts of kindness and compassion, and especially acts of kindness that you don't plan or calculate but come straight from the heart.

How do we know that kindness is the key to the castle of happiness? Ancient wisdom and modern science both tell us the same thing. Confucius once told his students, "There is one thread that strings together my teachings."

The thread that passed through the center of Confucius' teachings, like a string of beads, was the Chinese concept of "shu" the ability to put oneself in someone else's shoes, and act upon it. I guess you could describe that habit as "thoughtful kindness."

And now science is proving what Confucius tried to tell us 2,500 years ago. If you want to flourish, and be happy, be kind.

Kindness is the string that runs through the habits of happy people like a thread through a string of beads. Active constructive listening, which we talked about in the video on relationships, is a great way to express kindness. It's about showing that you value and care about what people are saying.

And the next video, which is about physical wellbeing, is about how to be kind to yourself, to take care of your body, as well as your mind. They both need lots of love. But now let's talk about the science of kindness itself.

We've now discovered that giving away money makes you much happier than only making money. That was the topic of a very interesting New York Times article a few years ago. The conclusion was, yes, money can buy you happiness, but only if you give it away.

In 2008, a group of social scientists came to this conclusion through three different kinds of experimental data. The first way that they found out was by looking at a national sample of more than 600 Americans. They found out that the people who spent more on gifts and donating to nonprofit causes seemed to be way happier. People who spent more money on themselves did not.

The second way they measured the impact of giving on happiness was by tracking workers before and after they received bonuses. They found out that workers who gave some of the money to others ended up being happier than the workers who only spent it on themselves.

The final way they discovered about the linkage between giving and well-being came from a really interesting experiment where they gave forty-six students either five dollars or twenty dollars to spend by the end of a specific day.

The students were told that during that one day they could spend the money on others or they could spend it on themselves. The students who gave away the money did a lot of different things. They bought presents for their relatives, they treated their friends to meals, they donated to homeless people, etc...

And they discovered that, yes indeed, the ones who gave the money to others, instead of spending it on themselves, were way happier by the end of the day. They also found out that, with the college students, only giving five dollars pro-socially had an impact on their well-being. The point is, it wasn't the amount that was making a big difference. It was the act of kindness itself.

There are many different ways we can express kindness and compassion. For the sake of simplicity, we can divide them into two kinds: planned acts of kindness such as volunteering, and unplanned, spontaneous acts of kindness.

No matter which, the bottom line is that people who care for others on a regular basis are happier and less depressed.

In the case of volunteering, scientists have found out that people feel happier with only one experience, but the people who experience the most benefit in terms of their mood were people who got involved in repeated activities, or what they call successive waves of volunteering.

There has been a great deal of research on elderly people volunteering, but not a lot has been carried out on young people. The surprising difference between the two groups was that the elderly experienced a very significant boost in well-being through volunteering, but young people didn't.

There's been quite a lot of speculation about this mystery. One of the main theories about why the younger group felt less happy is about motivation. The elderly mostly volunteered for the sake of volunteering, but the young people, in many cases, volunteered for extrinsic reasons. This means that many teenagers didn't volunteer purely for the sake of volunteering. They were gently pressured to do so in various ways. For example, some were basically following the crowd or they had been encouraged to volunteer by a parent, or they were volunteering not to bring happiness to others but to polish up their resumes.

We don't know exactly why, but the benefits we obtain from volunteering might have some linkage to motivation. In fact, we do know that personal autonomy, what psychologists call self-

efficacy, is very important for happiness. If we feel that we're in control, we are much happier than if we feel that our lives are being controlled by others.

We are talking about seven habits in this particular course, but there could be eight, and the eighth habit could be about autonomy, about cultivating personal freedom.

The third thing we found out through scientific work is that participation by recipients is very important for their self-esteem. In other words, if you go volunteering, you may experience greater happiness but, in many cases, unfortunately the people who are on the receiving end of your kindness sometimes end up by being more depressed. Why is that? It is because they feel powerless and they feel that people are assisting them because they are powerless. We are talking about autonomy once again!

What benefits the happiness of recipients as well as volunteers is if you involve them somehow in the activity. Next time you go volunteering, try to get people involved in something that makes them feel that they are a part of the activity and not just the recipient.

Now let's talk about unplanned acts of kindness, the spontaneous kind. They have a big impact on well-being, and we can practice them much more naturally, as we go about our daily activities.

A wonderful website called randomactsofkindness.org provides lots of tips about how to express kindness. It's great for people like me who are so busy we forget about the rest of the world around us. It's the people right next to us whom we take for granted. According to this website, the people who want to spread a little kindness are called Raktivists, which is kind of cool, because the word "raktivists" begins with the letters R, A and K, Random Acts of Kindness. I've seen t-shirts with the question, "Are you a raktivist?" The whole point of random kindness is that you're not calculating how you benefit through the act of kindness. It's kindness for the sake of kindness.

Have you discovered greater happiness through these sorts of unplanned acts of kindness? These can be very small things, like suddenly offering a seat to someone on the bus, or perhaps reaching out to a student who looks lonely or confused. And, of course, in that kind of situation the worst thing you can ask your colleague or fellow student is, "Oh, you look depressed! What's the matter?" The best thing to do is simply try to engage them in conversation and express an interest in what they are doing.

So let's summarize: Kindness was the thread that tied together all of Confucius teachings. To use a native American expression, it's about walking a mile in someone else's moccasins. On a scientific level, we've discovered that we need to earn a certain amount of money to stay happy, but the happiest people give some of it away.

We have discovered three ways that volunteering leads to greater happiness. Firstly, regular volunteering is very effective. Secondly, motive is very important. Volunteering only works if we do it for its own sake. In the third place, we should try to get the recipients of our kindness actively involved.

Finally, small acts of kindness work wonders, especially the random ones that come straight from the heart.