

21 Days Kindness Challenge: Compassion for others among College Students

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The study examined effects and experiences of a '21-days kindness challenge' undertaken by college students between the ages of 18-22 years from Vadodara city. The kindness challenge involved completing an assigned 'kind act' every day for three weeks. Pommier's (2011) scale was administered a week before and after the challenge to measure compassion for others. After conducting the kind acts, participants wrote daily reflection journals and attended weekly circles to share their experiences and challenges. Descriptive statistics and paired t-test were used to analyse levels of compassion for others, while reflection journals were analysed qualitatively. Statistical analysis revealed significant increase in levels of compassion for others after participating in the kindness challenge. Qualitative analysis revealed increased psychological well-being, bonding in interpersonal relations, self-confidence, and empathy towards others and their work. The study recommends the replication of such experiences for positive youth development.

Keywords: compassion, kindness challenge, psychological well-being, youth, India.

Positive youth development and 5th space

Youth is best understood as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to independence in adulthood. Awareness of a young person's place in society and values of interdependence as a member of the community must be strengthened in this life stage. Arnett (2000) claims that adolescence typically reflects immaturity and youthful behaviour, but young adulthood is a phase suggesting full maturity and perhaps a settled place in society with progress towards a career and establishing a family life. Therefore, he proposes the term 'youth' and 'emerging adulthood' as a way of classifying this post-adolescence stage.

Positive Youth Development (PYD) refers to intentional efforts of adults, communities, government agencies and schools to provide opportunities for youth to enhance their interests, skills, and abilities (Lerner, Lerner, Lewin-Bizan, Bowers, Boyd, Mueller, Schmidt & Napolitano, 2011). Its tenets can be organized into the 5C's which are: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring. Compassion and empathy for others is an important component

of the 5th C of caring (Lerner, Fisher & Weinberg, 2000). When these 5 C's are present, the 6th C of 'contribution' (to society) is realized. Gomez and Ang (2007) gave focal areas in promoting positive youth development that focus on holistic outcomes and increase psychosocial and societal well-being. These are positive people, positive places, and positive opportunities which facilitate and promote positive youth development in everyday contexts.

For positive youth development to occur, apart from the four well established spaces of family and friends, educational institutions, leisure and the workplace, the creation of a 5th space is imperative (Patel, Venkateswaran, Prakash, & Shekhar, 2013). The space of 'Active Citizenship' is called the 5th space. While Active Citizenship mainly focuses on socio-political issues, the 5th space focuses on the self, relationships and society for social change. The process of learning in 5th space flows from self to society, from 'me' to 'we'. The 5th space for youth is an interactive place where youth feel safe and accepted as they are. It can provide fun opportunities of voluntarily engaging with a diverse set of people from different genders,

religions or castes. By creating such a space, the youth got a platform to express themselves and be heard by others. By starting with their own self, youth would impact the society and if facilitated appropriately, these experiences can lead to heightened consciousness of self, enhanced leadership skills (like problem solving, decision-making, teamwork, and conflict-resolution), relationship-building capabilities and value-based stances on social issues. Compassion for self and others is at the crux of these important developmental milestones to be achieved in young adulthood.

There is a growing concern in society that compassion, and kindness are dying virtues, gradually being strangled by narcissism, competition, and prejudice. Yet psychologists, philosophers and theologians agree that compassion and kindness are at the core of human behaviour on which individuals, families, institutions and societies can thrive. Learning to be kind and compassionate towards others is a critical and ongoing process in development. It is an important part of a young person's developing social competence. The study of compassion and kindness finds a supportive niche in Positive Psychology.

It is primarily concerned with using psychological theory, research and intervention techniques to understand the positive, adaptive, creative and emotionally fulfilling aspects of human behaviour. The initial thrust for the creation of the field was a sense of disenchantment with the way 'psychology as usual' appeared to be preoccupied with disorder and dysfunction. This innovative new branch of psychology was a forum where scholars could explore the 'brighter sides of human nature' (Linley & Joseph, 2004).

A meaningful life in the Indian tradition is inherently altruist and ego-transcending. There seems to be a natural convergence between elements central to the Indian ethos (as depicted in our epics and puranas) and the aims of Positive Psychology (Rao, 2014). However, in India, the process of integrating Positive Psychology into mainstream Psychology is still in its infancy. Systematic efforts at discovering

convergences between Indian Psychology and Positive Psychology can go a long way in enriching our understanding of human well-being (Mehrotra, 2014). With specific reference to the Indian theory of emotions – Rasadhya proposed by Bharata in the *Natyasastra* in 3rd century AD, Paranjpe and Rao (2008) describe a list of eight major aesthetic moods or rasas and eight common corresponding emotions or Bhavas. These emotions appear repeatedly, last longer and dominate the minor emotions if both appear at the same time. These emotions are considered as propensities that colour experiences of an individual. Among them, karuna (pathos) is the rasa with shoka (sorrow) as its corresponding sthayibhaava. When rasas are manifested, an individual goes through vibhava meaning objects, persons and situation that provoke that emotion in them. These are marked by anubhava which is outwardly expressed by words or bodily manifestation. This ultimately leads to vyabharibhaava which incorporates several feelings and develops into permanent moods.

Compassion may be defined as the feelings of warmth, understanding, sadness and kindness that arise in witnessing distress and suffering of others. This feeling motivates the desire to help and care for others (Goetz, Keltner & Simon-Thomas, 2010). Compassion is the emotional undercurrent propelling kindness. The momentary thought-action tendency sparked by kindness is clearly an altruistic motivation or the urge to act prosocial. Thus, we can say that kindness and compassion are interrelated. Kindness is a purposeful, voluntary action undertaken with sensitivity to the needs or desires of another person and actively directed towards fostering their well-being. Kindness is a combination of emotional, behavioral, and motivational components (Otake et al, 2006). Compassion has two roots- biological and psychosocial. From a biological perspective, many theorists today believe that compassion is an innate capacity which is activated, to a greater or lesser degree, by the world around us. Generally, a person is compassionate if he or she considers the suffering of others and attempts

to alleviate that suffering as if it were his own (Cavanagh, 1995). Thus, compassion includes perceiving and comprehending another's psychological state (cognitive aspects), knowing another's feelings of happiness, sadness, distress and confusion (affective aspects) and responding to another in a way that is helpful (behavioral aspects). Developmentally, the seeds of compassion begin to move toward fruition as early as few days after birth and are unmistakably present at the beginning of the second year of life. At this stage, children possess the cognitive ability to perceive when another is in distress, the affective ability to experience emotional concern and the behavioral ability to engage in prosocial acts. Parents, by modeling compassionate behavior, become the primary teachers of compassion within the family context (Cavanagh, 1995). According to Pommier (2011), practicing compassion is associated with a variety of positive psychological outcomes such as happiness, improved social relationships, and protection against a host of negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, and anger. It is a useful concept applied successfully within disciplines of psychotherapy, medicine, and education. Finally, for families, it is a way for parents to build relationships with their children and teach compassion as a skill that could be passed on to others to transform society.

Measuring compassion for others

The scale measuring compassion for others is based on Neff's (2003) work on self-compassion. It draws from the Buddhist conceptualization of compassion and measures compassion incorporating non-western perspectives. It represents the link between self-compassion and concern for the well-being of others. Compassion is defined as "being touched by the suffering of others, opening one's awareness to others' pain and not avoiding or disconnecting from it, so that feelings of kindness towards others and the desire to alleviate their suffering emerge" (Wispé, 1999 cited in Neff, 2003, pp. 86-87). Compassion thus comprised kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. In all, the scale included six factors like kindness versus indifference, common humanity

versus separation and mindfulness versus disengagement (Pommier, 2011).

Based on Maxwell Maltz's work on self-image, there is a popular belief that 21 days is the shortest amount of time needed to inculcate a habit or engage in and strengthen a habit or value. However, there is further research explaining that habit formation indicated by automaticity needs longer time and depends on the nature of tasks (Dean, 2013). For all practical purposes, a period of 21 days was chosen for administering the kindness challenge for this research. The 21 days kindness challenge needed participants to perform random acts of kindness for self, acquaintances, strangers and the world at large. By giving opportunities to college-going youth to practice random acts of kindness, the research attempted to reinforce the much-needed virtues of kindness and compassion for others. The objectives of the research were:

1. To study the experiences and effects of 21 days kindness challenge on the youth participants.
2. To measure and compare the levels of compassion for others before and after the 21 days kindness challenge.
3. To describe the psychosocial effects of participation in 21 days kindness challenge.

It was hypothesized that the 21 days kindness program will lead to a significant increase in levels of compassion for others. Among the constituents, there will be a significant increase in levels of kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness and significant decrease in indifference, separation, and disengagement.

Method

The study used a quasi-experimental design with mixed methods. The sample of the study comprised 62 undergraduate and postgraduate youth participants in the age range of 18-23 years from The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. It consisted of 31 girls and 31 boys. Participants represented faculties of Science, Arts, Commerce, Engineering, Pharmacy and

Family and Community Sciences. The sample was selected purposively using snowball sampling technique. After describing the purpose of the study, informed consent was taken from each participant. The Compassion scale was administered a week before and a week after the 21-days kindness challenge. A WhatsApp group was created wherein everyday information about a kind act was sent for a period of 21-days. Participants were expected to conduct the suggested kind act on each of the 21-days. The kind acts were chosen from a set available of kindness.org. The acts were divided into three categories – for self, for family/friends and for strangers/world at large. They were also asked to maintain a journal and these responses were gathered through email. At the end of each week, a meeting was held for collective sharing of experiences and motivating the participants.

All the participants were informed about the study, purpose and aim of the study. Participation was voluntary and participants could leave the study anytime they wished to. Informed consent was taken from all the participants before the study. Confidentiality of all data was maintained. If any participant was uncomfortable doing any act, then he /she was free not to do it or replace it with another kind act. For any queries, researcher was available for consultation any time during the research. The tools used for the study were:

Open ended questions about the concept of kindness

A questionnaire with five questions was administered to understand the participants' concept of kindness before the 21-days kindness challenge began. Questions like what comes to your mind when you hear the word 'kindness'? Have you ever performed a kind act? Has anyone ever shown kindness to you? were posed. This was administered in a group by bringing all participants together in a classroom. The compassion scale was administered thereafter.

Compassion scale (Pommier, 2011)

Pommier (2011) developed a standardized, closed ended questionnaire which measures

the level of compassion for others. It includes 24 questions with a five-point rating scale where 1 is 'almost never' and 5 is 'almost always'. This scale was administered to the participants in a group one week before the 21-days kindness challenge began. A week after the 21-days kindness challenge ended, the questionnaire was administered again.

Daily reflective journal

Participants had to email a daily journal entry for each kind act they performed for 21-days. These were written after finishing the kind act for a day. Based on a given format, participants wrote their experiences of performing the kind act, the feelings they experienced during and after the kind act was performed and reasons why they felt that way. They also had to mention the challenges they faced and the responses of others to the kind act, if any.

Weekly meetings

At end of each week, a meeting was held for participants to share their experiences collectively and discuss any difficulties they faced while conducting the kind acts. All the weekly meetings were audio recorded for transcription. A summary of these meetings was made to document major points of discussion.

Feedback forms

Individual feedback was taken from participants to know whether they enjoyed the 21-days kindness challenge. They were asked to share how they felt after completing 21-days kindness challenge, whether the kindness challenge had changed the way they looked at the world now or had improved their interpersonal relationships.

Data was analysed statistically and qualitatively. The scores on the compassion scale were used for quantitative analysis. Mean and standard deviation of all the domains in the compassion scale were calculated. To test the hypothesis, paired t-test was conducted using scores of the pre-test and post-test on the compassion scale for each participant. Also paired t-test between each domain of compassion scale was calculated. All the

statistical calculations were done using SPSS software package.

The qualitative data was pooled from three sources – views about kindness in background information, reflective journals, and discussions during reflective meetings. Inter-rater reliability was established and common themes about concepts like kindness, positive feelings, others response, challenges, and so on were derived and categorized together. For each act, diagrams were made for each participant to identify its effects, responses and challenges. Then for each act, patterns were created using a flow diagram.

Results

The mean and standard deviation on all components of the compassion scale is described in Table 1. Scores before and after the kindness challenge are compared.

Table 1: Scores on Components of the Compassion Scale (N=62)

Domains	Pre-test		Post- test	
	M	SD	M	SD
Kindness	14.13	2.93	16.14	2.79
Indifference	13.52	2.87	14.52	2.33
Disengagement	14.87	2.74	15.97	2.18
Separation	14.08	2.83	12.97	2.69
Mindfulness	13.85	2.9	15.56	2.40
Common humanity	14.35	3.24	15.35	3.16

Note: M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation

As evident in Table 1, there was an increase in mean scores of all dimensions except separation. To know if the differences were significant, paired t-test was done on each component of the scale. Table 2 describes results of the paired t-test.

Note. $df = 61$, $p^{**} < 0.01$

As table 2 indicates there were significant changes in all the domains of compassion ($t [61] = 1.697$, $p < 0.01$) between pre intervention and post intervention scores. Therefore, it

Table 2: Results of paired t-test on Compassion Scale (N=62)

Domains	t-test scores	Significant (2-tailed)
Indifference	-2.50	.015**
Separation	3.066	.03**
Disengagement	-3.152	.03**
Kindness	-4.568	.00**
Common Humanity	-1.94	.057**
Mindfulness	-4.018	.00**

can be concluded that the kindness challenge intervention enabled a comprehensive increase in compassion for others, particularly in the domains of kindness and mindfulness.

Qualitative Analysis

Participants' responses on open ended questions about kindness were analysed. Daily journals were also analysed. Matrices and frequency tables were prepared. The daily journals were analysed and converted into flow diagrams to understand if specific patterns emerged. Flow diagrams were made for all 21 kind acts and the analysis comprised of psychological effects, effects on self and others, barriers, reactions of people you know or strangers and reactions of the receiver.

Key for the patterns depicting various themes:

- Effects on self
- Reasons for these effects
- Responses of others
- Responses of receiver
- Challenges

Flow diagrams for the kind acts which the participants found most interesting are explained.

The figure shows the flow diagram for the kind act "Write a thank you note to a teacher who has inspired you". Majority of the participants felt very happy after writing a letter to the teacher. The participants felt blessed for having good and encouraging teachers in their lives. They felt

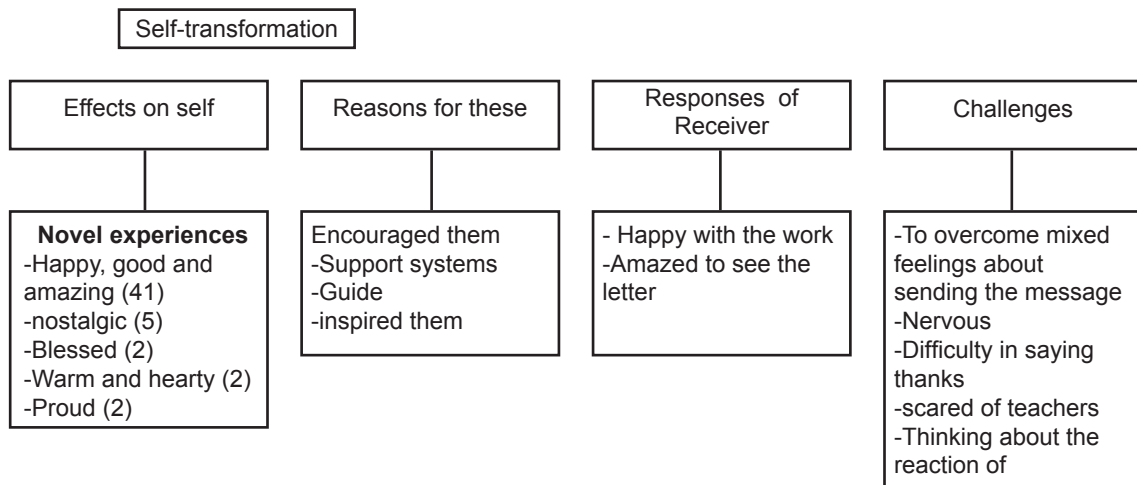


Figure 2. Kind Act: Giving a thank-you note to a teacher who has inspired you

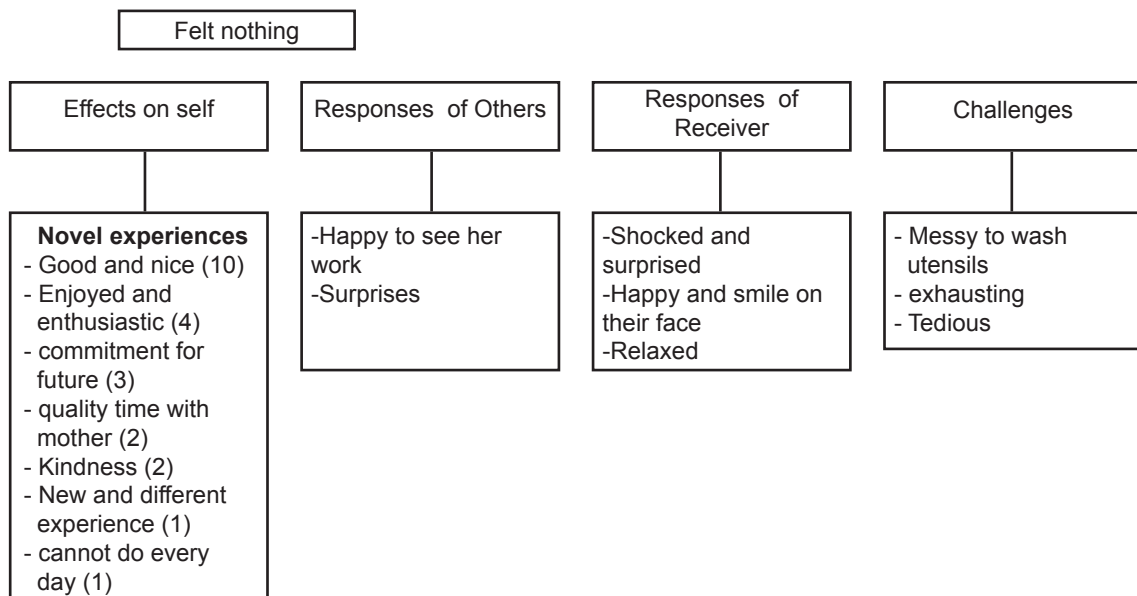


Figure 3. Kind Act: Providing help in household chores

excited and proud as they got an opportunity to write a letter to their teachers who had guided them. Teachers who received the letters were happy and amazed. Some challenges faced by the participants were difficulty in saying ‘thank you’ as they were very nervous, and some were sceptical about the teachers’ reactions. A participant mentioned:

“I felt very good from inside and blessed to have such an inspiring teacher (sir) in my

life as whenever I fall (fail), he is always there to help me and will always be there to give a helping hand. Giving him the letter gave me huge satisfaction that I could tell him about his position in my life”.

In another kind act, participants helped their mothers in washing clothes, utensils, cleaning house, watering plants, and buying household things. After doing this act, nine participants felt good, three of them gave commitment to

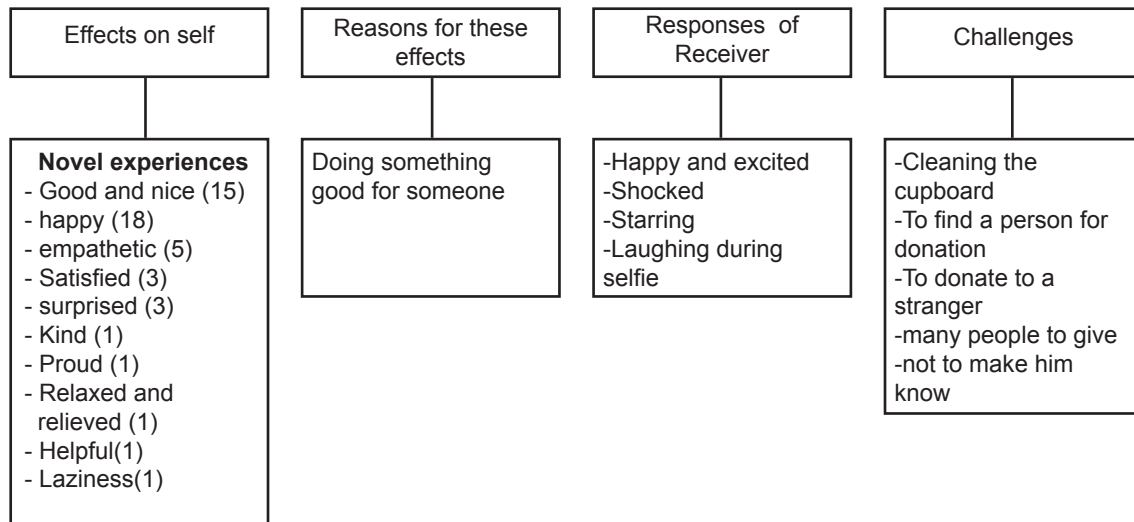


Figure 4. Kind Act: Clean your cupboard and donate extra clothes

help in future as well, and two participants said they were happy as they spent quality time with mothers. Four participants did not feel it was a novel experience as they were already in the habit of helping their mothers with chores. After this act, the mothers felt happy, and were thankful to their children. Some mothers were surprised to see their sons help them with household chores. Participants found this act challenging as it was very tedious and exhausting for them. Many participants mentioned that they could now empathize with their mothers who had to do the chores daily.

A participant reflected:

“Today as I woke up in the morning, I heard from mom that the maid is not coming due to her personal reasons, so I helped mom in cleaning rooms so that half of her burden of work is reduced. As I completed cleaning, she was very happy, and she praised me for my work, and she cooked for me my favourite dishes.”

For this act, participants gave away clothes to sweepers, construction workers, homeless people, care takers or watchmen in their communities. After giving away their clothes to the needy all participants mentioned that they

felt a sense of satisfaction. Six of them were empathetic towards the disadvantaged group and felt sad at their condition. Most people receiving the clothes were also receptive and happy. They were thankful and blessed the participants. A participant shared his experience as follows:

“I donated my clothes to a person in my community who is very poor. I was very happy but also a little surprised by the reaction of that person. The challenge was to give my clothes to that person in a way which does not make him feel low. The person felt very happy and he shared his snacks with me. I had a great time knowing him.”

Another participant mentioned, “Today I donated my clothes to the masjid caretaker. He was not expecting this and was happy. I felt happy too.”

As evident from the responses, there was an active exchange of positive feelings between participants and receivers of the kind acts. This mutual feeling of gratitude uplifted the spirits of both the giver and the receiver of the kind act. Table 3 indicates the feelings experienced by participants during the kindness challenge.

Table 3 Emotions experienced by participants (N=62)

Kind acts	Feelings of participants
Self-related Sit in silence Write a gratitude journal	Peaceful, energizing, stress buster, increased self-confidence
Related to Family/friends Appreciate a faculty member Compliment a classmate Say I love you to parents Call a family member Help in a chore Give free hugs Talk to your neighbour	Bonded relations, happy, light-hearted, nostalgic, smiled whole day, felt lucky, enjoyed, blessed, felt more open.
Related to strangers Donate clothes Give away something you treasure Thank a public servant Give water to needy Say hello to strangers	Thoughtful, work empathy, got inspired, smiled whole day, felt helpless, speechless, became aware of stereotypes
Mixed Domain acts Give free hugs Make time to listen to someone Choose your own kind act Post inspiring quotes around	Felt connected Painful, happy, Mixed feelings Sceptical, happy
Environment related Leave a place cleaner than you found Clean your campus	Good, happy. Enjoyed, realised one's duty.

The table 3 shows that while performing kind acts for self, participants felt peaceful, energized, stress free and more self-confident. Doing kind

acts for family and friends culminated into more bonding in relations. It resulted in light-hearted and nostalgic moments that made the participants happy. On the other hand, while performing kind acts for strangers the participants felt thoughtful, empathetic and became aware of some stereotypes they held about public servants and needy people. In the weekly circles, participants shared that they were now inspired to change existing stereotypes and become more trusting or open minded. When participants performed kind acts, related to the world at large or the environment, they felt as if they had realised their duty. Increased awareness and commitment to their surroundings was always propelled as they had opportunities to do something about environmental issues.

Overall, the qualitative results indicated a pattern of satisfaction and well-being in relationships that the kind acts reinforced.

Discussion

Research on happiness by Sin & Lyubomirsky (2009) indicates that people can improve their happiness levels by regularly performing simple positive activities, like practising gratitude or kindness. Simply by counting acts of kindness for one week, people appeared to have become happier and more grateful. The current research supports this trend and reiterates that being kind to others increases our own and others' levels of happiness, strengthens relationship bonds and increases psychological wellbeing.

Bartlett and Desteno (2006) in their study stated that acts of kindness can build trust and acceptance between people, encourage social bonds, provide givers and receivers with the benefit of positive social interaction, and enable helpers to use and develop personal skills and thus themselves. Thus, showing kindness to strangers helped the participants in building co-operation, trust, and a sense of safety in their communities. It also helped them to see others more positively and empathise with them. These are the foundations of a thriving local community and a flourishing society, which focuses on well-being for all.

India, with a burgeoning youth population, depends on its youth for new ideas to improve social conditions. Without the involvement and initiative of youth in civil society, India's social development is likely to remain stunted. It is thus imperative that youth potentials are channelized positively to ensure genuine political in the development of the country. The kindness challenge gave an opportunity to the participants for engaging with people from diverse backgrounds and social classes. It created a platform where they could express themselves, were heard by others and got a chance to understand others. The study was thus successful in creating a 5thspace by providing positive opportunities that could lead to societal contributions and connections that facilitated positive youth development.

Fisher, Busch-Rossnagel, Jopp and Brown (2012) explain the rising field of Applied Developmental Science (ADS) that focuses on the developmental strengths of youth. Highlighting various programs using the ADS principles, they mention that various forms of youth civic engagement can strengthen processes of social justice and socio-political well-being. ADS examine a wide range of familial, cultural, physical, ecological, and historical settings of human development. There is a focus on the relations among families, peer groups, schools, businesses, neighbourhoods and communities, physical/ecological settings and the socio-cultural, political, legal, moral, and economic institutions of society. The 21-day kindness challenge is modelled after the ADS principles to enable positive youth development. Thus, positive relations among ecological aspects are necessary. Doing a variety of kind acts helped participants to interact more positively with their immediate environments. Over the course of 21-days, they approached and understood their everyday environments from a different perspective. They introduced new and positive elements in their existing relationships with parents, friends, teachers, and community helpers which led to more positive outcomes, like psychological well-being and better interpersonal relationships.

For example, there is a strong gender stereotype in our society that men feel uncomfortable expressing their feelings into words. Men participants felt hesitant while doing acts such as 'leave a note for a friend' and 'say I love you to parents'. This may also be because it is not very common in Indian culture to verbally express love to immediate family members and most expressions of family cohesion are indirect and subtle. However, the participants reported they had become more expressive and were satisfied expressing their feelings for parents and friends because the 21-day challenge enabled this. Although they were hesitant earlier, performing the kind acts acted as a catalyst for them to become more expressive. This would not have happened in the routine course. Contrary to belief, they and their parents or friends appreciated the experience as well.

Limitations and Recommendations

The study had certain limitations as it focused on human beings in their natural settings. Firstly, participants sometimes could not perform all kind acts consistently. Barriers such as academic pressures and lack of time were cited as the major reasons for skipping some kind acts. In such cases, the participants were given extra time to finish the predetermined number of kind acts. Similarly, the daily journals were often not sent on time. Some participants sent the journal entries late and after rigorous follow up. The study was conducted with only 62 youths of the Vadodara city and thus has limited generalizability.

On a positive note, majority of the participants almost always finished the kind acts and journaling as per schedule. There were no demands from the participants to change a kind act due to discomfort or lack of interest, except for some resistance from young men in performing kind acts related to cleaning one's surroundings. Interestingly, participants did not show hesitation in performing kind acts with strangers or in public spaces. The enthusiasm in the second and third week of participation was noteworthy. Participants also clicked 'selfies' and posted pictures on the WhatsApp

group to inform the investigators that they had completed the kind acts for each day. This made the research process enjoyable and validated the data to a great extent. The pictures however were not made public to maintain confidentiality. Such instances were inspiring and reiterated confidence in youth ability to take responsibility for their actions.

If such a study is replicated with a larger sample, across genders and social groups, interesting trends may emerge. This can lead to a deeper understanding of compassion across the life span. Research tools to measure compassion in the Indian context may be developed in future. The study strongly recommends that institutional settings, especially educational institutions must plan and execute programs like the kindness challenge on a regular basis to reiterate values of compassion, processes of mindfulness and sharing common humanity among all involved. The study demonstrates the positive outcomes of doing so systematically.

Conclusion

Compassion is fundamental to the human experience. The study demonstrates that compassion manifested in everyday life can enhance psychological wellbeing and lead to better interpersonal relationships. As human beings we are hard wired for compassion, but our expression of kindness needs a supportive context. Without a supportive context, fears and insecurities hinder the expression of compassion, leading to many negative outcomes for self and society. The study demonstrates that innovative value-based programs like the kindness challenge should be interwoven in academic experiences of youth for positive outcomes. This research reiterates that the process begins with “me”. The ripple effects of kindness can lead to “we” become kinder and more considerate in the long run.

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