The Importance of Self-Care and Kindness

When There are Learning Differences

By **Lori Stottler, LMHC**

THESE DAYS ARE UNDENIABLY STRESSFUL. THE PANDEMIC HAS CREATED AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE SELF-CARE ISN'T A LUXURY BUT A NECESSITY. SELF-CARE COMES IN MANY FORMS, LIKE SELF-COMPASSION, SELF-AWARENESS, AND KINDNESS. KINDNESS IS AN ESSENTIAL FORM OF SELF-CARE BECAUSE IT HELPS NOT ONLY YOU BUT OTHERS AS WELL. IT IS A WIN-WIN COMPONENT TO INCREASE HAPPINESS, HEALTH, AND PRODUCTIVITY IN YOUR LIFE AND YOUR RELATIONSHIPS. AT THE COLLEGE INTERNSHIP PROGRAM (CIP), STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFERENCES REGULARLY PRACTICE AND EMBRACE KINDNESS AND SELF-CARE. THIS PRACTICE ALSO HELPS STUDENTS STAY FOCUSED FOR LONGER PERIODS OF TIME.

> *Kindness can increase your energy. Having more energy can help you become more productive at work, school, or other activities. It can also allow us to participate more effectively in our relationships and build stronger bonds with others.*

Some students say they don't feel they are kind or that kindness isn't one of their personal strengths. Where do you fall in the kindness continuum? For some people, initiating acts of kindness is almost second nature. For others, especially individuals with learning differences, it can be a challenge to develop a routine that considers the welfare of others. Think about kindness like a muscle in your body. When you have a workout routine, you can improve muscle tone and strength in your muscles. You can do the same with your "kindness muscle." The more you engage in acts of kindness, the stronger you become. This has been clinically proven to improve our overall mood and quality of life, which is a good reason to work out and get on your kindness muscle.

So how does being kind improve one's health? Kindness releases the "feel good" hormones in our body—specifically oxytocin and dopamine. In fact, one act of kindness releases a three to four-minute oxytocin boost with every act of kindness. Oxytocin is known as the "love hormone," so a kind act really does make one feel good. Oxytocin also increases our self-esteem and optimism. When we feel good, we are kind towards the important people in our lives. Acts of kindness lower our blood pressure and increase our energy. They also decrease stress. Kind people have 23 percent less cortisol (the stress hormone) and age slower than the average population. Often, students with learning differences are surprised to learn something other than eating well and exercising can improve their overall health.

Social scientist John Gottman began studying relationships in the 1970s and found one of the main components of a lasting relationship was kindness. How can we become kind in our relationships? The biggest component of kindness in relationships is to be present with our partner. What does that look like? Being present is to be openly curious about what the other person is telling us without distraction. The next time your significant other or friend engages you in conversation, pause, become curious, put away distractions (phone, Internet, etc.), and be in the moment with that other person.

When we engage in kindness with intent, we almost naturally become present with others, because after all, kindness is doing something for someone other than ourselves. Applying kindness to relationships can create stronger connections with our loved ones. CIP works with students to apply kindness in their relationships. This helps them create more meaningful friendships and romantic partnerships.

Kindness can increase your energy. Having more energy can help you become more productive at work, school, or other activities. It can also allow us to participate more effectively in our relationships and build stronger bonds with others.

One of the best elements of kindness is that it's contagious. One act of kindness can create a ripple effect. The effect not only helps us in our relationships, in our health, and our productivity but also benefits the lives of others. We consider kindness an act of self-care because there are many benefits when we practice kindness. Using kindness as a self-care tool benefits all the relationships around you; it is powerful. It is an act that serves not only us but those we interact with as well. It has the potential to ripple through our lives and positively affect others.

Lori Stottler, LMHC, is a clinician at CIP Brevard and has worked in the mental health counseling field since 2014. The College Internship Program (CIP) is a comprehensive transition program that has specialized in the educational needs of teens and young adults with autism and learning differences for over 35 years, offering year-round and summer transition programs across the US since 1984.

CIP is a national transition program for young adults with autism, ADHD, and other learning differences. For information about their five year-round and summer programs across the US, visit www.cipworldwide.org or call 877-566-9247.