



## The Healing Power of Kindness

**Jennifer Fisher (Jen):** Kindness, compassion, and love are more than just the cherry on top of a good life. They are major factors to life-long good health. They impact your metabolism, your immune function, your mental health, and even more.

This is the WorkWell podcast series. Hi, I'm Jen Fisher, chief well-being officer for Deloitte, and I'm so pleased to be here with you today to talk about all things well-being.

**Kelli Harding (Kelli):** There are these large population studies showing that our workplaces have a profound impact on our health and most of us think that it's important to have a good doctor, but it turns out it's also important to have a good manager.

**Jen:** I'm here with Dr. Kelli Harding, a Columbia University trained psychiatrist, who specializes in kindness and the interplay between mental and physical health. In her book, *The Rabbit Effect*, she explores how love, friendship, community, purpose, and our environment impact our health more than what happens in a doctor's office.

**Kelli:** So, I'm a physician and I got interested early on in medical school with this mystery of sort of what are we missing in medicine. You know, you study about disease, you spend years studying about disease in textbooks, and then you meet the patients, and you realize there's this mismatch that what you expect in terms of diseases isn't always what happens. And so, you end up seeing people who defy diagnoses, you end up seeing people who would, on paper, they look like everything is okay: a squeaky-clean bill of health. But then when you meet them, they're not feeling well. They're not functioning well. There's a lot of pain out there. So, it was really sort of that that led me, I guess, down the rabbit hole to study, what is it? I thought it had something to do with the mind/body connection. So, I ended up doing training in internal medicine and then psychiatry and I still didn't really feel like I had an answer to explain these medical mysteries. And so, from there I ended up doing a research fellowship in medically unexplained symptoms at Columbia University here

in New York, and then I ended up also getting boarded in psychosomatic medicine, and I still didn't totally feel I had an answer, believe it or not, after all this...

**Jen:** You are relentless...

**Kelli:** Yeah, it really became this passion and meanwhile, clinically, I've mostly worked in the emergency room here in New York City seeing patients who come in, with both medical and behavioral concerns and people with very treatable illnesses who continued to not do well and also people who do well in the hospital, but leave and keep coming back. So, someone, one of my wonderful research mentors, Dr. Arthur Barsky, told me about this study involving rabbits. He thought maybe I should check it out. And back in the 1970s, there wasn't a clear understanding how a high fat diet would affect heart health. And so, lots of people were doing research on this and Dr. Robert Nerem, who is a fantastic basic scientist/researcher, was doing a study looking at basically, genetically identical rabbits and giving them all a high fat diet, and you'd expect them all to develop the same pattern of heart disease and what would ostensibly be like strokes in humans. And much to his surprise, when he was doing this study one of the groups of rabbits had far better health outcomes than the other rabbits. And much to his credit, he didn't ignore that finding. Because obviously the easy thing to do would have been to just, like, replicate this study and try it again. But he looked around to try to figure out what went wrong. And he realized that all the rabbits that did better were under the care of the same researcher, and she was a particularly kind and caring researcher, and what they noticed is that she wasn't just feeding the rabbits their kibble, she was picking them up, she was petting them. She was giving them love and kindness and, you know, they thought that this was too big a finding that somehow the social world was impacting these animals' biology, and so much to their credit they repeated the study, got the exact same findings, and published it in the Journal of Science, you know, really prestigious medical journal. And then like many journals, it sat on the shelf for many years. This study was really pivotal for me because it got me across the street at the Medical Center up at Columbia, literally into the School of Public Health to try to learn more about how does our social world impact our health.

**Jen:** And so how does it?

**Kelli:** Here's the shocking thing, because most of us when we think about our health, we tend to think about diet, exercise, sleep, you know, the occasional trip to the doctor. And absolutely access to medical care is critical for every human being. The thing I did not understand, but now know that there's decades of research to support, is that our social world is our major contributor to our health. And what I mean by that is our everyday interactions, our everyday interactions in our homes, in our broader communities, in our schools, and in our workplaces and, you know, it so turns out medical care, the studies show that it's probably about, 10 to 20% accounts for our total health, and that other 80 to 90% is our social world. And genes play a role in that, they do, but they're not as fixed as we once thought. It turns out we're much more the authors of our own story than we realized.

**Jen:** That's pretty powerful.

**Kelli:** Actually, as the doctor, it gives me goosebumps to think about this and the science is so cool, Jen. I can't even tell you it's like and it's this neat moment where it's really coming together in terms of all these decades of public health research and then what's happening is really exciting studies in the fields of epigenetics, which is not that changing the DNA

itself, but how our environment shapes the DNA and then also telomere research, which is like super exciting and awesome and interesting.

**Jen:** It is, so let's get specific here. How does kindness impact our physical health?

**Kelli:** So, we all know stress is not great for our health, but it turns out that kindness boosts our immune system, it lowers our blood pressure, it helps us feel better. And what I think is amazing, because there's sort of study after study about this, and what's amazing about it is something we all kind of intuitively know, like when we feel sick it feels really nice to have, you know, a supportive hand on our shoulder. There's just this sort of like moment of comfort and this is where it gets so critical and it interplays with what we know about the stress system and we know that kindness buffers stress, and so this comes in 1,000 interactions during our day and that's the piece that is so exciting because we can actually control that to some extent. And that doesn't mean to say that conflict is not going to come up, because we know conflict is everywhere. But being able to manage both our reaction to things that happen and also being mindful that our interactions really make a difference for people, you know, one of the places we talk about this is in the work setting, because there are these large population studies showing that our workplaces have a profound impact on our health, and most of us think that it's important to have a good doctor, but it turns out it's also important to have a good manager.

**Jen:** It is one of my favorite quotes from you, I was going to ask you about it, but you already went there.

**Kelli:** Thank you, and I think it's really important that people realize that, because we tend to get so focused on outcomes and bottom lines, but we've got to pay attention to the process and the people that are involved. And the really cool thing too is that we know that not only is it good for our health though when we feel supported in a workplace, but we're actually more productive and effective workers and, you know, when we're not in a fear mindset we are able to use more of our executive functioning, and we are able to think more creatively and problem solve and that's exactly the kind of workplaces we all want to show up to. You know, living here in New York City, I always like to look around at the subway and most people are sort of engaged looking at their phone, but also just sort of get a gauge for how excited do people feel to come to work, because what an incredible world we would live in if everyone felt really jazzed to show up to work and do a job that was toward a greater purpose and part of something bigger.

**Jen:** And then the same question for an area that I'm very passionate about, which is mental health and what is the impact of kindness on our mental health?

**Kelli:** So, I'm so glad you brought up mental health, Jen, because I think that's really the elephant in the room that we need to be talking about. And we know from all of this data is that our mental health and our physical health are closely intertwined, and kindness is a big part of that. We know that mental health is profound in terms of, you know, it's the number one cause of disability around the world, it costs over a trillion dollars a year in lost productivity, yet oftentimes it's not something that's talked about in workplaces and there's still this stigma around it. So, the question is, "What can we do to better support each other in our day-to-day environments?" And it turns out, there's a lot. It doesn't necessarily mean seeing a mental health professional, but there's lots of things that we can do. So that includes awareness, just being aware that we all have things that we're struggling with, that nobody else is aware of, but it affects our day-to-day functioning. A big part of that is

traumatic experiences, actually, and from the data we know that every other person you pass on the street has a history of some sort of childhood trauma. And that is something that is so...it's so prevalent and so unrecognized. In *The Rabbit Effect*, I sort of make it the parallel between what was smoking in the 1930s. It's like it was everywhere but nobody could figure out what was causing all these problems, and it's the same with traumatic experiences. So, a big part of that is recognizing it's there and then supporting people where they need support and there's wonderful programs like mental health first aid. A lot of businesses are now doing training...that's wonderful. So, the idea and for listeners who have done it, it is sort of like CPR for mental health, and the idea is we can all support each other and there are simply not enough mental health professionals to go around. We need to distribute this to all of us and be talking about it and leave our door open for people to share when they're not feeling their best.

**Jen:** are you saying that simply, which I guess I shouldn't say simply, because being kind isn't always simple. Actually, you have said that it's hard. Having kind of an abundance of kindness in the workplace, whatever your workplace is, will change the whole dynamic.

**Kelli:** It is, and I think this is where it's, so it's these micro-interactions and I'd like to call them micro-kindnesses, sort of the opposite of micro-aggressions.

**Jen:** I am a big fan of "micro" habits, so I like micro...I think they are achievable.

**Kelli:** Yes, it's little things, it's like when you walk down the hall to go grab a cup of water or something, you know, looking people in the eyes, saying hello. Little tiny things, because we know that when it comes to our social circles it's both the quality and quantity so that means those little micro-interactions really count and you know it's not just in the workplaces, it's all the things that happen before you get to work, too, and after, because that affects our mental well-being when we're at work, and that can include things like looking the person who hands you a cup of coffee in the eye in the morning. I think we're all now, like, so focused on our chip and paying for our stuff, or we order ahead and don't interact with the person. So yeah, I had an experience the other day getting a cup of coffee and I realized I pretty much didn't talk to a single person in the whole encounter and, which is amazing, because it's a potential for social interaction. Or the grocery store is another big one.

**Jen:** Yeah, when we talk about kindness, when we're giving kindness to others or we are being kind to others, we know that there's obviously a positive impact on others, what does the science say about the impact on us, when we're being kind or giving kindness to others.

**Kelli:** Well, this is what's so cool, it's like a complete win-win. So, being kind is good and then also receiving kindness is good. And I think it is really important to know that giving the kindness and whoever you are, that's an important part of being a human being, and it boosts our health. So, there are amazing studies from nursing homes that even caring for a plant makes a difference, you know, like it doesn't always have to be these like grand acts of kindness. It can just really be these tiny day-to-day, or caring for a pet or a child or a loved one, that actually is really important and even when somebody, for listeners who are out there who may be caring for a family member who is ill, it's actually really important for somebody who's even in the receiving role of kindness to be giving kindness as well and to keep that in mind. So, we know that volunteers live longer, which is exciting because it's a complete win-win, and it's about all these hidden factors of health. And in terms of our social world the more things you can do to get involved in all these different areas, including

our neighborhoods in particular, and also, building friendships and volunteering is a great way to combine all those things. It's a win-win.

**Jen:** So, is kindness contagious?

**Kelli:** Yes, yes. So, this is also where the neuroscience lines up so nicely with what we know from public health. So, we are constantly mirroring each other, and this is something to be mindful of as we're looking at our phones a lot of the day, particularly for listeners who may have kids. I know, I have three kids, so I'm extra mindful of this now. We're constantly mirroring each other, and we know that good behaviors are contagious. So, you're more likely to be kind if you see somebody else being kind. Unfortunately, that also works in reverse, and so it's important to point out, but here's the thing, you know, a lot of times I think people are sort of waiting for a top-down change. Like, let's wait for the system to change, but we don't have to. Like, we actually, every single individual who's listening to this has far more sway in their circle than they realize and it's...they're these studies of a friend of a friend, and it turns out actually your actions are impacting people, it's got this lovely ripple effect downstream. So, there is absolutely no harm in doing something kind and it can have this tremendous change of culture and sometimes it happens overnight, which is pretty exciting.

**Jen:** And so, is kindness, I mean, can you cultivate that? Is it a practice?

**Kelli:** Yes.

**Jen:** So, what does that look like? I mean you talked about micro-kindness and so meaning that it doesn't have to be something big. Is it holding the door for someone? Is it smiling at someone? Is it just, you know, I live in a condo building in Miami, and, you know, getting into the elevator in the morning and saying good morning? You know, in your workplace, just saying good morning because I know for me personally there's been a number of times where I just have so much going on in my own head. I'm not trying to be unkind, right, but I just don't even interact with the world around me and then, you know, you realize it and you're like, wow, I'm not a very nice person.

**Kelli:** Actually, Jen, I'm so glad you brought that up, because we're all human and we all have our moments, and so kindness is absolutely a practice. And I think, you know, sometimes people think of kindness as, I think in the past it's been equated with kind of like a weakness mentality that somebody is a pushover, but, in fact, kindness takes a lot of courage, a lot of backbone, and it really means being able to navigate conflict in a way that is focused on the problem and not demeaning the people that are involved, but there are not sort of these groups of, like, kind or unkind people, and I know a lot of times people sort of feel like well, I'm kind, the problem is, like, that guy over there, right.

**Jen:** Right.

**Kelli:** So, you know, it's like we all have our moments and actually we were joking that I've had the experience of like going on my...oh, we tend to be less kind when we were rushed and we are living in a busy, busy, so...

**Jen:** That explains my elevator, not looking at anybody, talking to anybody.

**Kelli:** Yeah, so I mean there's the great study about that...there was a study that was done in the 70s that was just so brilliant, called the Good Samaritan study at Princeton and it was students who were studying theology to become priests, and they were asked to give a 3 to

5 minute lecture about the Good Samaritan parable. And while they were preparing for the lecture, they were told, "We actually need the room you're in. You're going to have to go across campus to give the lecture." And half the group was told, "You're really in a rush," and the other half was told, "Take your time, you get there when you get there." And then, as part of the study, the students, they had a confederate of the study, sprawled out across the walkway, you know, clearly in need of help, but the students who were in a rush basically just passed right by that person, whereas the students that were told they had more time actually were much more inclined, like significantly more inclined, to stop and help so...

**Jen:** Yeah, that's interesting, some colleagues and I actually wrote a paper on scarcity mindset. Does scarcity make you dumb, because it really, you know, having this or believing this perception that you have a lack of time or resources or you're in a rush or anything like that, you're not as good at making good decisions or kind of interacting appropriately with the world around you. And so, I mean, that kind of doing that paper that we wrote has significantly changed me like recognizing, okay, wait, it's a mindset, I'm in a scarcity mindset., and so kind of shifting that mindset for myself to say, "Okay, I'm not in this state of scarcity. Hold on, let me take a deep breath, let me step back."

**Kelli:** Yeah, absolutely and I'm so glad you shared that, because it's true when we were rushed, so like, you know, I was on my way to give a kindness talk. I ended up pushing somebody on the subway accidentally, trying to squeeze on to this very crowded subway and then I thought, geez...

**Jen:** We are all human.

**Kelli:** Yeah, we are all human and thankfully, she wasn't at the talk! I did apologize, but I was going to say the other thing that's so fascinating about time and I think when it comes to kindness and the practice of kindness is taking that deep breath, so listeners out there can take a deep breath and realize we actually have more time than we realize and I think that what's so funny is that scarcity mindset, because our perception of time is warped.

**Jen:** Yeah, I know for me I don't always behave in the way that I'd like to when I feel rushed or I feel like I'm in this scarcity mindset, so...

**Kelli:** Yeah, and I was gonna say it's easy to.... Oftentimes, extending kindness to ourselves is the hardest part and so being mindful of that. It can be easier often to be kind to others or be intentional about kindness to others, but we really have to also be kind ourselves and schedule those breaks and those kindness reminders in whatever capacity we could do that.

**Jen:** So, you've talked about a couple of times about kindness in the workplace, what are some ways that managers can cultivate an environment or culture of kindness in the workplace, what are some like specific tactical things for our listeners, that managers can do in workplace?

**Kelli:** Sure. So, the number is infinite and it's dependent on the workplace, you can tailor it to what...I think it's important to feel authentic in what you're doing and then also tailor it to your workplace, but the key idea is what can you do to support the people so that they feel like human beings in your workplace? And, I think we often tend to sort of like whether it's work and life, but actually it's just the same person...

**Jen:** Fully integrated, yeah.

**Kelli:** That's fully integrated and so, you know, I've seen best practices include things like before starting meetings just doing a check-in, you know, how was your weekend, like talking about things outside of work actually, and kind of getting a sense of who is that person as a person and as a human being, actually helps you navigate when difficult situations arise. And inevitably they come up in meetings, you know, there is a deadline, and I think that's where it's actually most important to dig into the practice of kindness and the nice thing is, the more you practice it the better you get at it, too.

**Jen:** Right, and I mean, in truth, being kind doesn't require money.

**Kelli:** Yes, and that's the thing, like, it's like infinite and free and it's...

**Jen:** Available to everyone at any time, we only just have to be aware of it.

**Kelli:** So, I think that's one of the nice things. Every day, the people who are listening, you have many choices in a moment, and, if you can, choose kindness because you never know the impact that's going to make on somebody else's life. And it's really profound, because I've been really trying to put this into practice. So, for instance this just happened to me on a flight, asking a flight attendant, "How's your day going?" And he said, "Nobody ever asked me that." And here's somebody who's interacting with people all day long and nobody's checking in with him, but that's something we can all do that in these little ways, and when you feel good, you tend to pass it on. And the other thing is, we know that loneliness is as significant a risk factor for health as things like high blood pressure, obesity, even, it's more of a risk factor, also heavy alcohol use, smoking 15 cigarettes a day, it's really quite amazing what a critical, overlooked, that factor loneliness is. So, I would encourage you to also reach out to a friend who you may think is going through a hard time, because, really, just knowing somebody's got your back makes a world of difference.

**Jen:** Yeah, and it just doesn't take a lot of time. You know, I know firsthand the impacts of that you may not know, but I'm a breast cancer survivor and so...

**Kelli:** That's right.

**Jen:** Yeah, for me I was very fortunate that I had this community and then I think once you're done with treatment, you're not seeing your doctors regularly. People, they stop checking in, not because they're ill-intentioned, but because everybody is excited that you're done with treatment and life goes back to some sort of new normal. And so, I actually recently wrote a blog about this and I said continue to check in after, you know, because sometimes for people that's the hardest part, right, because they're not seeing their doctors and they are kind of continuing to live with this fear of what if it comes back. So, I think a lot of what you said really resonates with me. How is your work? How do you feel your work is changing the medical community because I know in my own experiences, I see a lot more things being integrated into what I would consider traditional medicine, which is phenomenal and really exciting?

**Kelli:** Right, I feel really encouraging and also, Jen, I just wanted to say thank you for sharing your story, because I think it's really important. First of all, I got goosebumps as you were talking because it's really incredible, the levels of support and what a difference that makes for somebody that's going through something challenging, and I think the important thing to keep in mind when we think about health is, human bodies are prone to diseases, stuff is going to come up, and we just want to have as many buffers in place and, when things happen, as many supports in place to help people do and feel and function

better, and then even, hopefully, once all is resolved and back to that new normal, that you continue to have those layers of support. So, in terms of the medical profession, and for those listeners that are in health care, I think what is so heartwarming is this has really been embraced by so many clinicians especially. And part of it is because we have to address patients as whole human beings and in a 15-minute visit, or 10-minute visit, or sometimes 5-minute conversation, you're not going to be able to do that. So, we have to recognize that health goes so much beyond just what's happening in our hospitals and clinics that what's happening in all our communities. And we have to put supports into place and we have to try to bridge this gap between our centers of medicine and then also what's happening in the community. So, it's exciting because I'm seeing more interdisciplinary teams. I think clinicians really get this, and the more that we can address the social dimensions of health, the better we're all going to be, because we know that more compassionate physicians, who have more time tend to be kinder and actually their patients have better health outcomes, which is such a win-win all around. So, I'm so excited I'm hearing hospitals talk about this now, I'm hearing the clinicians talk about it, and most importantly, I'm hearing people in the business world think about this because for listeners, you probably don't think of yourself as working in public health, but actually, you're working in public health every day, we all are, in all these different ways, and teachers, too, and so if you're teaching any classes, education is a big factor in our health.

**Jen:** I'm so grateful Kelli could be with us today. Thank you to our producers and our listeners, you can find the WorkWell podcast series on [www.deloitte.com](http://www.deloitte.com) or you can visit various podcasters using the keyword "WorkWell," all one word, to hear more. And if you like the show, don't forget to subscribe, so you get all of our future episodes. If you have a topic you'd like to hear on the WorkWell podcast series or maybe a story you would like to share, please reach out to me on LinkedIn, my profile is under the name Jen Fisher or on Twitter at Jen fish 23. We're always open to your recommendations and feedback and of course if you like what you hear, please share, post, and like this podcast. Thank you and be well.

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