

THE IMPACT OF ACTS OF KINDNESS ON PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING, HAPPINESS, AND SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Introduction

Why did I choose this topic area?

As a mother of two beautiful girls, Leah and Ava, kindness is a value we live by daily, through sharing toys, teaching patience, and having conversations about our favourite things of the day, kindness has become central in our lives. During my studies, I often wondered: what if something as simple as kindness could uplift others the way it often uplifted me and my children on hard days? That thought sparked this whole project.



(Random Act of Kindness Day!, 2023)

Framing of the research:

In an era where mental health concerns have reached crisis levels across universities, this research examines a deceptively simple but deeply human practice: kindness (McAfee et al., 2025). Despite its universal presence in everyday life, kindness is often underexplored in scientific terms, especially when considering its systemic psychological benefits.

Why this study is important:

University students are navigating overwhelming moments; academic pressure, social anxiety, financial insecurity, cultural transitions, and the upheaval of post-pandemic recovery. These stressors, according to Lin et al. (2025) converge to shape a student population increasingly vulnerable to depression, burnout, and disconnection.

Key Question:

How might consistent engagement in kind and prosocial acts serve as a psychological booster or even a form of intervention?

Psychological Crisis in Higher Education Data Insights

- Up to 1 in 3 university students experience clinical anxiety or depression (Saravanan et al., 2021; Halliburton et al., 2023).
- Reports of social isolation and loneliness in Universities across the globe have surged post-COVID (Salimi et al., 2023).
- Only 13% of UK students say they feel “very connected” to their university communities (Siimane, 2023).

Rationale and Research Gap

Although kindness is frequently acknowledged in philosophical, religious, and social domains, its scientific measurement and operationalisation remain inconsistent (Szafran & Cwojdzinska, 2024).

Much of the existing research has:

- Focused on children and adolescents.
- Treated kindness as unidimensional, ignoring its complex emotional and behavioural layers
- Failed to connect individual prosocial actions with measurable psychological outcomes like happiness, well-being, or social inclusion.

This study addressed these gaps by introducing a multifaceted intervention model using daily kindness tasks, applied psychometric tools, and pre and post statistical evaluation.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS PREVIEW

- This study is grounded in robust psychological theory, positioning kindness not as anecdotal sentiment but as a measurable intervention:
- Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985): Kindness here supports basic needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence.
- Broaden-and-Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2004): It described positive emotions to be building long-term psychological and social resources.
- Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis (Schroeder et al., 2014): It describes kind acts driven by empathy generate internal psychological rewards.
- Reciprocity Theory (Falk & Fischbacher, 2005): It describes acts of giving to be creating social cycles of mutual support and trust.

Together, these frameworks allowed me to examine kindness not as a vague virtue but as a measurable psychological intervention.

Methodology

Designing a method to test kindness was both challenging and exciting. I wanted something that was scientifically valid but also retained a real-world feel, something students could realistically do in their everyday lives.

Research Design Used

I opted for a Quasi-Experimental design (Pre-test and Post-test with Mixed Between-Within Subjects Design) for this study because of the following reasons:

- Quasi-experimental allowed practical application in a naturalistic environment, preserving ecological validity.
- A true Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) was not feasible due to participant availability and institutional constraints.

Participant Profile

I screened my participants through the university's Experimental Management System (EMS), where participants signed up and received anonymous ID codes and emerged with 64 Participants:

- 38 participants in the Experimental Group
- 26 participants in the Control Group

Ethical Considerations

I followed a homogeneous group (cohort design) that structured my study to focus on Students enrolled in Psychology or Counselling programs at UWTSD. I also followed the following Ethical Standards set by the university (University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2025) and BPS (*Code of Ethics and Conduct* | BPS, 2021):

- Approved by the university's ethics board
- Informed consent obtained
- Right to withdraw emphasised at all stages
- Data anonymity via code system

Sampling Design

For this study I used the homogeneous convenience sampling from UWTSD, where participants were randomly allocated by the Qualtrics Randomiser tool based on group assignments completion.

Group Assignments Completion

Participants in the experimental group performed at least three acts of kindness per day over seven days, guided by a structured list. The control group received no intervention but completed the same pre- and post-assessments.

- Experimental Group: Completed 7-day kindness challenge. (38 Participants)
- Control Group: Completed only the surveys (no intervention). (26 Participants).

Pre-Test Phase

All participants completed.

- Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ) (Hills & Argyle, 2002).
- Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) (*The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)*, 2021).
- Social Connectedness Scale (SCS) (Lee & Robbins, 1995).

Post-Test Phase

- All participants retook the same three questionnaires
- Entered their unique EMS code for entry to the questionnaire
- Entered their memorable password created within the first questionnaire

Intervention Phase

- Experimental Group: Performed 3 acts of kindness per day (from an approved and provided list)
- Control Group: No activities assigned

Materials Used

I chose the materials below for their proven validity and relevance to my research aims. Together, they offered a comprehensive view of the participants' psychological state.

1

Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (Hills & Argyle, 2002)

Assesses subjective happiness
High internal reliability ($\alpha > 0.80$)

2

WEMBWBS (Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale)

Measures mental well-being
Highly validated ($\alpha = 0.91$)

3

Social Connectedness Scale (Lee & Robbins, 1995)

Assesses feelings of belonging and social inclusion
Strong consistency ($\alpha = 0.90$)

Using these tools together provided a comprehensive picture of participants' psychological states, capturing emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions.

Data Analysis Strategy

Software Used:

IBM SPSS Statistics Statistical

Tests:

Mixed ANOVA (Between-Within Subjects) to assess:

- Changes over time (pre vs post)
- Differences between groups (control vs experimental)
- Time $\times$ Group interaction effects

Why Mixed ANOVA?

- Allowed me to evaluate both within-person change and between-group differences
- Useful in uncovering the true effect of the kindness intervention

The interaction effect was particularly crucial because it helped determine whether the kindness challenge had a unique impact beyond normal fluctuation or placebo-like effects.

Results

Once the data was collected, I began sit using SPSS version 26. My main goal was to test whether the kindness intervention brought about any statistically significant changes in happiness, mental well-being, and social connectedness.

Happiness

Using the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire, I compared pre- and post-test scores between the control and experimental groups.

- The experimental group (those who engaged in daily acts of kindness) showed a remarkable improvement.
- Their average score increased from 63.26 to 79.11, while the control group remained essentially the same, with scores hovering around 76.04 to 76.65.
- Statistical analysis revealed that this difference was significant, and the interaction effect showed that the improvement was unique to the kindness group.
- What's insightful here is that participants in the experimental group actually started out less happy than the control group, yet after the intervention, they not only caught up, but they also surpassed them.
- This dramatic shift speaks volumes about the potential of kindness as an emotional amplifier. It also confirmed what I had hoped: that kindness, though simple and low-cost, can yield measurable emotional benefits in just a short amount of time.

Well-Being

Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)

Pre-test Means:

Control Group: 46.81

Experimental Group: 41.50

Post-test Means:

Control Group: 48.81

Experimental Group: 47.74

- The results for mental well-being, measured by the WEMWBS, were slightly more complex. Both groups experienced an increase in their well-being scores.
- The control group's scores rose from 46.81 to 48.81, while the experimental group improved from 41.50 to 47.74. So, we do see a positive trend.
- However, the interaction effect was not statistically significant, with $p = .145$. This means that while both groups improved, the improvement in the kindness group wasn't large enough, in this case, to be considered a unique effect of the intervention.
- That said, the main effect of time was significant, with $p = .006$, which suggests that participants in general felt slightly better post-study, possibly due to self-reflection or the mere act of participating in research.
- To me, this finding illustrates that well-being is multi-dimensional. It's affected by many factors, emotional states, life circumstances, stress levels, support systems. Kindness may still help, but perhaps it needs to be combined with other interventions or extended over a longer duration to have a stronger effect.

Social Connectedness

Pre-test Means:

Control Group: 41.50

Experimental Group: 35.74

Post-test Means:

Control Group: 40.12

Experimental Group: 44.21.

The experimental group increased their sense of connectedness by over 8 points, while the control group declined slightly. The interaction effect was significant:

$$F(1,62) = 8.660, p = .005, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .123$$

This indicates that acts of kindness had a meaningful and measurable impact on how included and socially engaged participants felt. The main effect of time was also significant ($p = .038$), but again, it was the kindness group that drove the substantial change.

Discussion

As I reflect on the results of this study, I am genuinely encouraged by the overall findings. The intervention revealed a statistically significant increase in levels of happiness and social connectedness among students who participated in the kindness challenge. This aligns with my initial belief and hypothesis and supports prior research suggesting that engaging in prosocial behaviour is closely linked to enhanced well-being and interpersonal satisfaction.

Impact of Kindness on Happiness

- One of the most striking outcomes was the statistically significant increase in happiness within the experimental group.
- Participants who engaged in daily acts of kindness over the course of a week reported a marked improvement in their overall happiness, which not only validates prior research in positive psychology but highlights the immediate emotional payoff of prosocial behaviour.
- The simplicity of the intervention, three acts of kindness per day, was key. Despite being low-cost and easy to implement, it had a profound effect on mood and emotional outlook.
- The experimental group, which began the study with lower happiness scores than the control group, not only improved but ultimately surpassed them in the post-test.

To witness this shift was incredibly rewarding. It confirmed that kindness truly functions as an emotional amplifier—and perhaps, more importantly, as a personal and communal lifeline.

Well-Being and Psychological Benefits of Kindness

The well-being scores were also encouraging, although the improvement was not statistically significant compared to the control group. This made me reflect on the layered nature of mental well-being. It became clear that while kindness does contribute positively, well-being may require more sustained or multifaceted interventions.

Impact of Kindness on Wellbeing

- While well-being scores in the experimental group did increase post-intervention, the improvement wasn't statistically significant when compared to the control group.
- This led me to reflect on how well-being is a broad, multifaceted construct. It's influenced not only by short-term emotional experiences, like happiness, but also by deeper life circumstances, stress levels, support systems, personal history, and so on.
- Therefore, while kindness contributes positively, it may need to be combined with other factors or extended over time to generate lasting change.
- Individual and environmental factors such as stress, academic pressure, and personal circumstances may also have played a role in influencing these results.

This finding was both meaningful and encouraging, suggesting that kindness, when practised intentionally and consistently, can produce substantial positive emotional shifts in a short timeframe.

Kindness and Social Connectedness

Another area where kindness made a measurable impact was social connectedness. The findings showed a significant improvement for the experimental group, with participants reporting feeling more socially included and less isolated.

Impact of Kindness on Social Connectedness

- The most rewarding insight for me came from the significant increase in social connectedness.
- This confirmed that kindness not only affects our internal states but also alters how we perceive our place within a community.
- It supports the Reciprocity Theory, which posits that acts of kindness tend to be mirrored and reciprocated, leading to stronger social bonds.
- Personally, this resonated deeply with my own experience of being a student, sometimes feeling isolated within a academic community. Witnessing how small acts of connection can transform that perception was incredibly validating.
- This was deeply meaningful to me. Social connection is something many university students struggle with. The idea that kindness, something as simple as complimenting a classmate or helping a peer, could shift how people see their place in a social group, is powerful.

The findings also reflect the principles of Social Reciprocity Theory. When we extend kindness to others, it's often returned, creating a feedback loop of connection and inclusion.

Methodological Considerations and Limitations

- As much as the results were encouraging, it is important to recognise the limitations of this study.
- First, the sample was drawn exclusively from psychology and counselling students, which limits the generalisability of the findings.
- These students may already be more attuned to emotional and prosocial dynamics.
- Second, the study was short, just seven days, and relied on self-reporting. While the psychometric tools I used were valid and reliable, there is always a risk of social desirability bias.
- Therefore, while the immediate effects of kindness are clear, we don't yet know how long those effects last.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

- Future studies could extend the intervention period, include a more diverse student population, and perhaps integrate qualitative feedback to capture the personal meaning behind participants' experiences.
- More broadly, universities and mental health services could incorporate kindness-based initiatives, like peer mentoring, gratitude projects, or daily kindness challenges, as part of their well-being strategies.
- Ultimately, this study shows that kindness is more than a social nicety. It's a psychological resource, one that empowers individuals, strengthens communities, and fosters resilience.
- Despite these limitations, I believe this study lays a strong foundation for future work. Kindness is an accessible, low-cost behaviour that can be encouraged and embedded within university settings to support student well-being.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore a simple yet profound question: Can small, daily acts of kindness improve students' mental health and sense of connection? The answer, based on the findings, is a resounding yes, with certain conditions.

Key Take-Aways

- Happiness and social connectedness improved significantly for those who engaged in kindness, reinforcing the emotional and interpersonal value of prosocial behaviour.
- Psychological well-being also increased, though not significantly compared to the control group, highlighting that long-term change may require sustained or multifaceted support.
- These outcomes align with major psychological theories, including Self-Determination and Broaden-and-Build Theory, suggesting that kindness can build internal and social resources.

From this study, I learnt that kindness is not just an abstract value, it is a psychological tool that can shift our emotions, reframe our social experiences, and potentially act as a protective buffer during difficult times.

References and Appendices

Behind every research project is a foundation built on credible sources and transparent documentation. The References and Appendices sections serve as the backbone of academic integrity and clarity in this dissertation

References

- I compiled the references using the APA 7th Edition referencing style, the reference list includes a diverse range of peer-reviewed journals, seminal psychological theories, and relevant empirical studies.
- This reference base ensured my research was not only original but also rooted in a well-established scholarly conversation.

Appendices

- I included raw materials and supporting documents such as: Participant Information Sheet, Consent Forms, Kindness task list, Copies of measurement scales (OHQ, WEMWBS, SCS), and Ethical approval letter to serve as evidence of transparency, allowing readers to verify and replicate the study if needed.

Together, these sections reflect the academic responsibility and ethical rigour that guided my research from start to finish.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

1. What is prosocial behaviour and how does it differ from simple kindness?

Prosocial behaviour refers to voluntary actions intended to benefit others, such as helping, sharing, or cooperating. It often involves personal effort or cost and may not seek a direct reward. Kindness is a subset of prosocial behaviour, focused more on emotional expression, whereas prosocial behaviour covers a broader range of helpful actions (Naclerio et al., 2024).

1. How does engaging in kind behaviour reduce stress, anxiety, or depression?

Engaging in kind behaviour can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression through both psychological and biological effects. Acts of kindness trigger the release of chemicals such as oxytocin, dopamine, and serotonin, which help to lower stress levels and improve mood (Hossain et al., 2024).

1. How does kindness foster a greater sense of community and social connection?

Kindness fosters a greater sense of community and social connection by building trust, strengthening relationships, and encouraging reciprocity. When people act kindly, they signal care, respect, and empathy, which makes others feel valued and safe (Swensen, 2024).

1. What are effective ways to incorporate kindness into daily life to improve wellbeing?

- Kindness can be integrated into daily life through small acts like smiling, thanking others, giving compliments, and offering help. Checking in on someone, actively listening, or volunteering time also fosters connection. Expressing appreciation and practising self-kindness support both mental wellbeing and stronger relationships (Cary, 2025).

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