

Love matters: Kindness, belonging might just save us

Science quantifies the need for love, caring relationships and belonging. It could be the cure to a hurting world. But who knew that giving a little kindness could also heal the giver?

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Robin Chenoweth: Ok, inspired listeners. It's Valentine's week. I'm going to go out on a limb here, in the name of love. When first planning for our February episode, I found myself exhausted, barely able to keep my eyes open. And so, I did what some creatives do to spark ideas. I took a 20-minute power nap. And I had the most surreal dream. There was a stadium, similar to Ohio Stadium but much bigger. It was packed full of beings — maybe people, maybe something else — waving banners and flags. And they were doing something like the Wave, but cooler. They were popping through a kind of space-time continuum, little portals that allowed them to jet through time and back into the stadium. And they were deliriously cheering. A companion stood at my side, serving as my guide. And I asked him:

“What are they doing? What's the point of all of this?”

“What it all means,” he replied, “and what they are basically trying to say, is, we love you.”

“They know me?” I asked.

“Yes!” he said. “They cheer for you; they are pulling for you; they cry with you; they are wild about you. And it's not just you. Everyone has this same kind of supreme fan club.” Every. Single. Person.

There you have it, straight from my dreams to your ears. Shmaltzy, you say? Maybe. But that dream got me thinking about a maxim. Can love really change the world? Not the cupid and candy hearts kind of love. But kindness, belongingness, acceptance. What do scholars and researchers at The Ohio State University have to say about the impact of those kinds of love? As it turns out, a lot. And so, we give to you ... the love episode. This is The Ohio State University Inspire Podcast. I'm Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer. Meghan Beery is our student intern. Inspire is a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology.

February 17 is Random Acts of Kindness Day. As we at Inspire record this, RAKtivists are planning to call their moms...

Audio from RAK last year: Hi, Mom. It's Random Acts of Kindness Day, so I wanted to call you and say I appreciate you.

Robin Chenoweth: They're writing notes of appreciation, contemplating how to spread goodwill both on Ohio State's campuses and around the globe. But can that make a difference in a world of political division, gun violence, opioid addiction and racial inequity? I asked Colette Dollarhide, program chair of the counselor education program at Ohio State's College of Education and Human Ecology.

Robin Chenoweth: There's just a lot to be downcast about right now. How much can kindness and caring and a sense of belonging, how much can that really help?

Colette Dollarhide: It can help a tremendous amount. Knowing that we are social animals: We evolved because of our ability to communicate and relate and help each other. It's in our DNA; it's in our deepest levels. We need relationships. We thrive in relationships, and without them, we do not thrive. And in fact, animal studies have made it clear that animals that are not given parental attention and nurturing will simply die. ... The studies in isolation have indicated that, that is a device of torture, that kind of extreme deprivation for.... severing all relationships and connections, can seriously cripple an individual in physical and emotional ways.

Robin Chenoweth: Wow.

Colette Dollarhide: I teach theories. There are a whole body of theorists — Carl Rogers, Viktor Frankl, Alfred Adler — who refer to the importance of that social connection. ... Abraham Maslow wrote about peak experiences, and those peak experiences being those moments where we know why we're alive. Those almost never happen in isolation. They more often happen in connection with other human beings. That's how powerful reaching out and making that connection can be.

Robin Chenoweth: Some researchers, in fact, say loving connection is as essential to well-being as a healthy diet. Without it, mental health and then physical health begin to decline. Studies have shown that close friendships in middle school, for example, can predict whether kids will have self-worth or experience anxiety and depression as young adults. It's one reason focusing on children's belonging is so crucial. If you know or teach children, or you were that kid hanging out on the fringes of the classroom — and there were a lot of us — you'll want to listen to what Associate Professor Karen Beard has to say about belongingness. She researches educational administration and educational policy and teaches positive psychology to school administrators.

Robin Chenoweth: The research backs this up, right, that social belonging is critical to the outcome for not just children, but for people in general?

Karen Beard: Absolutely it does. Not only does it back it up. It's quantifiable. Yes, in fact. ... One of the common denominators we're looking at and finding in children — especially children and adolescents who are isolating, and what causes adolescents to do these things that we're seeing in the news — one of the common denominators is that they have not felt that sense of belonging, that they have been bullied. I've heard that over and over again. And so, when they feel isolated in the context that they have to perform in every single day, the frustration that comes from that we see played out. And, so, one of the things that we have to think about when talking about social belonging is that it's a preventative measure. And because I work on it with schools, it's also a protective measure that we have to address. You know, we absolutely know it. And it is indeed quantifiable.

Robin Chenoweth: One root of the problem for kids: an immature prefrontal cortex, where thoughts and actions are orchestrated in the brain. They can limit kids' abilities to name their emotions and understand them or put them into context.

YouTube video: You have one more question to do.

Child: No, I don't!

Teacher: Yes, you do. Don't you yell at me! Sit down at your seat, please, so we can work on it.

Child: I'm done!

Teacher: No, you have one more to do.

Child: Yes, I am!

Teacher: You have one more to do.

Child: I am done!

Teacher: You are not done, and I am trying to help you, so come sit down.

Child: I'm done!

Karen Beard: What we now call social emotional learning, which adolescents and children don't always have the ability to do or the skill set — it can be developed. We do have growth mindsets, so it can be developed. That's the blessing in all of this. ... And those thoughts and actions have to be in accordance with internal values and goals. So, teaching those values, teaching the values like kindness, teaching social belonging, teaching emotional learning, and how to interact with one another, those civil skills, early, is very, very important to eliminate some of the isolation and the frustration that we see in the adolescent, immature pre-cortex that causes them to react and respond out of emotions they don't even fully understand.

Robin Chenoweth: The preventative measure. I asked Colette Dollarhide how school counselors work to help isolated children integrate. Dollarhide and the college have for years taught counselors techniques that science now substantiates.

Robin Chenoweth: This is where it can go wrong, right?

Colette Dollarhide: Correct.

Robin Chenoweth: If kids are not getting the love that they need in order to learn to have empathy for others, right?

Colette Dollarhide: Right. Exactly.

Robin Chenoweth: Do you think that it's possible to change outcomes just through kindness?

Colette Dollarhide: Absolutely. Absolutely, I do. 100%. One of the activities that I teach our school counselors to do is called social mapping. And, so, they go into a classroom, and they ask the children to name three kids that you like, or that you talk to frequently. And then they gather all that information, and then they can find out who's isolated in that classroom, and then work with the teacher in order to design activities that bring that kiddo into the classroom community.

Robin Chenoweth: Maybe the child hands out papers or class materials. Or maybe she helps a classmate who is on crutches.

Colette Dollarhide: Then the counselor can also target that kiddo to help with teaching social skills, what does it mean to be a friend? How do you reach out and communicate? Because we do have some kiddos who don't have a real good sense of, how do I make a friend? I don't know how to do that. Those are skills that can be taught. ... And one of the things that the counselor teaches is how to help. The kiddo who's isolated is often given opportunities to help other kids in a way that gives them the good feelings

and connection and starts to integrate that child into that classroom community. So, there's a direct example, yeah, of how kindness and acts of connection can go both ways.

Robin Chenoweth: And as RAKtivists will tell you, this works for college students and adults, too. Jennifer Cheavens is an Ohio State professor of psychology who co-authored a study with her former doctoral advisee, David Cregg.

Jen Cheavens: The research really suggests that social connection and belongingness and being connected to people that you care about is one of the most important things that we can measure in terms of how people feel, in terms of their psychological health and their psychological well-being. That that really matters a lot for people.

Robin Chenoweth: So people who are more socially connected tend to be a little happier and more fulfilled, that kind of thing?

Jen Cheavens: That kind of thing. So, they are people who are much more socially connected, tend to be happier. They tend to have more meaning in their life. They tend to experience feeling like they're living, like, kind of their optimal selves.

Robin Chenoweth: I was actually thinking from the other perspective: how people need kindness in order to feel like they belong and feel like they are accepted. The research that you did with David Cregg looks more at the people who do acts of kindness. Why did you decide to concentrate on them?

Jen Cheavens: Well, one of the things that we were focused on in this study was trying to figure out, are there pieces that are important to people's lives that might be missing in some of the therapies that we do for depression and anxiety? So, David was my PhD student, and this was his dissertation. And he was really interested in social connection as an outcome. And some of the research to date suggests that although cognitive behavioral therapies are quite good at reducing people's symptoms of depression and anxiety, they might be missing this outcome of social connection. So, you might have a really successful course of cognitive behavioral therapy come out of this feeling less depressed and less anxious, but not necessarily more connected to other people. And, so, we wanted to test if you had people engage in acts of kindness, acts of kindness that were somewhat costly to them done for other people, if that would impact their symptoms of depression and anxiety. But even more importantly, if that would impact their experience of social connection.

Robin Chenoweth: When you say somewhat costly, what does that mean?

Jen Cheavens: We assigned people to either acts of kindness or thinking about things differently with a tool that we use in cognitive therapy or engaging in pleasant events with other people. So, we really wanted the acts of kindness to be separable from the pleasant activities, from engaging with other people in a way that makes you happy. The focus of the acts of kindness group was to do something for someone else that was for them and cost you something that could be any kind of resource, though. Your time. It could be money, mostly time and money are the main resources that people engage in.

Robin Chenoweth: Study participants, all of whom who had elevated symptoms of anxiety and depression, baked cookies, held open doors, complimented people they knew or who were complete strangers.

Jen Cheavens: People shoveled the sidewalk for a neighbor, called their grandparents. Bought coffee for someone at Starbucks who was in line behind them.

Robin Chenoweth: I had that happen once. It was great! Really nice. It wasn't you, was it?

Jen Cheavens: It wasn't me. It wasn't me.

Robin Chenoweth: So, what were your findings of the study?

Jen Cheavens: Well, the good news is, what we found first was that all three of the conditions, so acts of kindness, thinking about things differently, and pleasant events all resulted in lowering people's symptoms of depression and anxiety over the course of those five weeks. In addition to that, the acts of kindness group did a little bit better than the thinking about things differently group in terms of reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety and increasing life satisfaction. But the main finding of what we were really interested in is that the acts of kindness group did better than both the other groups in terms of increasing social connection. And the reductions in depression and anxiety for those and the acts of kindness group came via or indirectly through increases in social connection.

Robin Chenoweth: People with anxiety and depression, they tend to be the ones who are cutting themselves off from other people. You found that by reestablishing those connections, it put them on the road to well-being.

Jen Cheavens: We did. You know, one of the things that happens, I think, when people are experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety, is that it can really result in anhedonia for folks who are experiencing symptoms of depression, which means things that were pleasurable to you before aren't very pleasurable anymore. And when people are feeling anxious, social anxiety is a really common form of anxiety. So, both of those experiences can result in people limiting who they're spending time with and isolating a little bit more than they might normally do. So, we found that, yeah, engaging in acts of kindness, like thinking about other people, really moves people towards feeling better and feeling more socially connected.

Robin Chenoweth: Other studies indicate that showing kindness can decrease blood pressure and cortisol, a hormone that impacts stress levels. Think about it. Volunteering at the dog shelter or helping someone pick up their spilled groceries can boost serotonin and dopamine, chemical messengers in the brain that help create feelings of satisfaction and well-being. And when you smile at someone, it's neurologically contagious. Mirror neurons that control smiling in *their* brains light up, and more often than not, they smile back. We are hard-wired to be social beings. Colette Dollarhide.

Colette Dollarhide: The good feelings that come along with those significant connections with other people keep us, it feeds us, it nurtures our understanding of the human condition, our empathy, our ability to be compassionate. So, the more that we spend time in these nurturing relationships, the more that it fills our capacity for love and empathy.

Robin Chenoweth: What about having compassion for a complete stranger? We all run into to people who are homeless. We all might see an accident happening on the freeway. What about some of us makes us jump into action, and other people kind of hold back?

Colette Dollarhide: I think that we calculate in that moment whether or not we have the situational efficacy to be helpful. So, I personally faint at the sight of blood. ... You know, my husband over the years has done that with three different accidents where he pulled people out of a — two of them was a burning car, one was where the car was crushed, but he was able to get the person out and that resulted in saving their lives. Even though he's not a medical professional, he just jumps into action and just does it. And I just sit there in awe. ... So, whether that's kind of an emergent kind of situation or experience where someone says, 'I'm going to step forward and help here,' or whether it's a thoughtful, 'I'm going to mentor someone,' or 'I'm going to read to the elderly' or those kinds of things. As long as they're doing something to establish and maintain their humanity, I think that that can feed their soul.

Robin Chenoweth: How do we bring our own kids up to be that person who facilitates kindness?

Colette Dollarhide: We definitely want to be teaching those things directly. Directly sending those messages to our families, to our kids, about human compassion and thoughtfulness.

Colette Dollarhide: And it's through modeling. So, kids learn what they hear in the car, around the TV, around the dinner table. We want to also be good role models for kindness and compassion and empathy. So that kids hear those messages throughout their lives and hear that it's our job to take care of each other. It's our privilege, it's our honor, to be able to serve our community in meaningful ways, whether that's our school classroom community, it's our neighborhood community, or it's our family community.

Robin Chenoweth: Because so many of these behaviors are established in early years, let's again consider schools. If you look, even there you can find glimmers of hope. A high school football coach talks a teen into giving up his gun, and then hugs him as police stand down.

Keenan Lowe: "I didn't want to hurt anybody; I didn't want to hurt anybody." That's what he said to me. "I just wanted to hurt myself." He goes on to say, "Nobody cares about me," and I told him I care about him. I think he needed a hug more than he needed to be tackled to the ground.

Robin Chenoweth: A bullied kid in London, Ontario, decides to turn the narrative around by holding doors open at his high school, and later is crowned prom king.

Josh: The first few weeks, when I started doing it, they were kind of shocked. Not many people hold doors, right? But after that, people started to open up to me.

Fellow student: He had literally, just by holding doors and saying good morning, he had turned ... he made a drastic change in his life.

Robin Chenoweth: As a positive psychologist, Karen Beard works to study why things go right in schools, when they go right, like when a school with underprivileged students has a spike in academic scores.

Karen Beard: A study of what is happening or interrogating conditions or situations or organizations when things are going well. That's what I study. ... I value more and more, not only the way I make sense of the world, but the way I can support that by evidence. And that came from many of the lessons learned as a child. So, the things that we are teaching our children are impactful, lifelong. And if we're taking a conscious effort to teach kindness, that will impact their understanding and their sense-making throughout their entire life. ... I think about this a lot. I think about children a lot. So, learning actually comes from teaching, and a teacher can't teach what they don't know, or are unwilling to learn. So

that's a two-way street. Not only are they teaching the kindness, but they have to have inherently within them the ability to understand and be kind and communicate that kindness.

Robin Chenoweth: How imperative is it that children receive this, and what happens when they don't?

Karen Beard: This is kind of the driving point; I think of the entire podcast. When we don't carefully attend to our children's understanding of kindness, or humanity, and their productive or possible productive role in that — if we don't attend to it, then they begin to feel the unbelonging. And that's the imperative part of why they have to receive this. The frustration that develops from not belonging, or from a lack of love or a lack of acceptance, I think that's the frustration that we're seeing on the news nightly. That frustration comes with not being able, again, to take chances to grow, to learn. When you can't trust your community to accept you, whatever your community looks like, then it stifles you. And the human spirit was not designed to be stifled. So, when that spirit is stifled, it leads to the things that we're trying to protect away from: depression, anxiety, anger. And even more difficult is, left alone in their hurt, it builds a desire to hurt somebody else. Because no one likes to be alone in their hurt. And when they're hurting, the tendency is to want to see somebody else hurt. ... We have to impress upon our children more love, more attention, more care, more humanity, a better understanding of kindness and how that pays off higher dividends, than the selfishness that capitalism drives or the selfishness of getting the bigger piece of pie. Those things have to be counterbalanced. And that's how we have to, in my mind, that's why it's imperative for children to receive and understand why kindness is important, what their role is in humanity and how they understand humanity and society so that they can feel like they belong and not only that they belong, but that they can contribute.

Robin Chenoweth: So, let's take the flip side of that. What happens when a child does receive all that belonging, and all that care and love and support?

Karen Beard: I started my career as a classroom teacher. And I have to be candid with you. When I had 25 students in a room, it felt really big to meet each student's needs. But I will say that if I showed care and concern for any one of those children on any given day, they felt it. They knew it. When you have a friend going through a hard time and you pick up the phone, or you walk over to their house, or you make yourself available for a hug, that kind of kindness, that kind of care, breeds hope. ... There's a thirst to want to not only give it back to you but give it back to somebody else. There's a desire to, to share that not only that feeling, but also that higher sense of self and connectivity. We're social creatures. We love to connect. Even the most ... and, this is funny, because a lot of scholars always say, I'm really an introvert. And it's true, we are. We are very introverted.

Robin Chenoweth: No way!

Karen Beard: And it's, oh, huge, huge introverts. ... But even an introvert can appreciate the thirst and the desire to be socially accepted, and to be among friends who get them, who understand them. Even in their quiet ways. But also, not just in that belonging sense, but then it feeds that hunger to be that for somebody else.

Robin Chenoweth: In some regards, as adults, we are not too far removed from our middle-school selves. It's like when filmmaker Jonah Hill pulls out a cardboard cutout of himself when he was 13 and overweight, and shows it to his therapist in the documentary, *Stutz*.

Jonah Hill: The work is like inching towards not only accepting but like, bringing this person ... like it's great to be this person. But it's still very hard.

Robin Chenoweth: He's looking for self-acceptance but still very much needs belonging, too. And maybe that's why we relate to the kids. We crave love and belonging at 13 but also at 35 and at 80. And we all remember when we didn't get it.

Karen Beard: When somebody doesn't accept you, or makes you feel like you don't belong, particularly because of a characteristic over which you have no control, such as race, gender, size, age...that says more about them, and their social immaturity than it does about you. And I think, a lot of us, as we're building our identity, we internalize and take in a lot of those external cues of others, but that immaturity belongs to them. And we should not take ownership of that. That takes some of us longer to really, fully understand and appreciate because context, especially when you're young, you're building your identity or your understanding of yourself, is important. And especially as how we live out our lives in the United States, where sexism and ageism, and racism and caste-ing continues to persist.

Robin Chenoweth: As adults, though, we can strive for more. We can take love to the next level.

Karen Beard: Even how we meet or respond to others, or their unkindness of others, it's hard, you know, and we don't always get it right. But in response, the socially mature are called to do no harm. It may not initially feel good, but because it's the higher ground, it feels good to be right. And to offer grace in the face of someone else's pain, that is also an act of kindness.

Robin Chenoweth: Their negative response to you is coming out of pain?

Karen Beard: Yeah, like I said, before, hurt people don't like to be alone in their own hurt. And so, they tend to hurt others. That's coming from a place of pain. And it really is hard sometimes. Because when somebody hurts you, the natural response is to want to hurt them back. But the mature response, the ethical response, is to offer grace. The kind response is to offer grace. And that's what I'm saying. It's not always easy.

Robin Chenoweth: I thought you were talking more about protecting yourself.

Karen Beard: Yeah.

Robin Chenoweth: But you're really talking about extending grace to someone whom others might find it very, very hard to extend grace to.

Karen Beard: That's exactly right.

Robin Chenoweth: It's really important, the self-talk that's going on in a person in that moment.

Karen Beard: Absolutely. That's why I use the words maturity and immaturity. The social emotional learning aspect of this is very important. And if you haven't done a lot of self-work, and I'm not just talking about children and adolescents now, but if you haven't done a lot of self-work, your responses may be very immature. And you could be adding to more of the complexity and challenges and problems that we have in incivility, rather than where we can go with civility and kindness and care as individuals operating in the world. And that's kind of where, in response to what you said, what can we do individually: You know, do the self-work and extended care.

Robin Chenoweth: As you're talking about all this, I'm thinking about some of the vitriol and some of the just, the horrific things that are said on social media,

Karen Beard: Right, exactly.

Robin Chenoweth: in those, in those digital contexts.

Karen Beard: Exactly.

Robin Chenoweth: I think it's so easy to try to fire back.

Karen Beard: Yeah. Because that's our ego, wanting us to be, have the last word, the last say or being the bigger voice. And that's something we have to keep in check. When all we're thinking about is ourself, and how we look to the world, then you're absent the ability to show kindness to somebody else in that moment. So, keeping your ego in check is really important. And you're right, online, a lot of those platforms, almost feed into that. We see it all the time. You see the vitriol, the terrible comments that no one would make if their mother was in the room. But because they're online, they think they can say whatever and do whatever they want.

Robin Chenoweth: Yeah, they think it's okay. But they're damaging; those things are very damaging.

Karen Beard: Right. They're severely psychologically damaging. I think everybody who gets on a social media platform should have a picture of their mother pop up. (Laughs) She needs to be in the room when you're popping off.

Robin Chenoweth: Or your grandma, maybe.

Karen Beard: Your grandma might be better.

Robin Chenoweth: Would you say it in front of grandma?

Karen Beard: Would you say that? Really?

Robin Chenoweth: So, here's your assignment. Put a photo of your granny or your mom on your desktop. Show a little love. Help out a kid who's feeling insecure or unaccepted. Check on your neighbor. Give to someone what you are craving. A smile. A helping hand. A kind word. Be a part of someone's Supreme Fan Club so that they can become part of yours.

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