

## A New Way To Practice Our Values

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We've all experienced that moment when something shifts. Often times it's triggered by the smallest of things.

A smile that disarms. A friendly greeting. A grateful pause before a meal. An unexpected compliment, surprise gift, thank-you card, or phone call from an out-of-touch friend.

These micro-moments of lived intention-- small exchanges of kindness, tiny catalysts of gratitude, or brief seconds of mindful attention-- hold incredible potential to transform the trajectory of a day, week, year, or even a life.

We notice this a lot around New Years. Whether it's weight loss, giving up smoking, deepening mindfulness, or any other personal goal, each January 1st bears witness to a societal upsurge of enthusiasm, energy, and resolve towards changing a habit. An upsurge which gradually wanes as the calendar slips into February, March, then suddenly it's July and by fall only a dim flicker of our original intention remains .

Many of us seem to recognize the importance of making personal changes in our lives, and yet struggle to put them into practice. Forbes Magazine points out that less than 10 percent of us actually stick to our New Years resolutions. Habits are hard to break and it turns out that as much as 40 percent of all our actions are habitual. We don't consciously do them. It's hard to change what we aren't conscious of. But thankfully, it's not impossible. So, how do we go about trading in old, unwholesome habits for new, positive ones, in a sustainable way? A special kind of three-week challenge just might hold the answer.

A couple of months ago, a Peace Studies professor in Los Angeles did a 21-day Kindness Challenge with her students. As part of the challenge, each student was invited to do a unique act of kindness every day for 21 days in a row. One particular student always sat at the back of the class. Her face expressionless, her eyes glazed over in disinterest. When the 21-day challenge began, it was unclear whether she would join in the spirit of it. To everyone's surprise, including her own, she decided to give it a try. Participating in the challenge was a profound turning point for her. Suddenly, she was being called on to do something transformative. It's easy to sit in class and mentally tune things out, but when we engage in a micro-moment of kindness-- we invite a visceral act that shifts our physiology and rewires our neural pathways-- and our mental patterns can't help but come along for the ride.

"Pay Forward a Surprise Treat" was the kindness idea for Day 1. This student baked vegan donuts for her class, and initially, just placed them at the front of the room. But when others hesitated to help themselves, she took a flying leap out of her comfort zone. Walking to the front of the classroom, she began to hand out her homemade treats. For

her it was an unprecedented gesture of generosity -- and it opened the door to a whole new world.

Day after day, she stepped up her kind acts, and began to notice changes within. Not only was she happier and more attentive, but her whole attitude towards the class had changed for the better. Micro-moments of kindness for 21 days in a row reinforced her daily shifts in perspective, and doing it together with her class created a shared context, culture, and consciousness for deepening in this personal commitment. Fortunately, this kind of transformation can't be compartmentalized -- she was not just more engaged in class, but also, with her friends and family. After the challenge, this initially reluctant student had even started to initiate and lead various projects around campus!

Ever since the launch of KindSpring's 21-Day Challenge portal in September, stories like hers have been lighting up constellations of communities, like stars in a moonless night sky. The portal offers up a variety of 21-Day Challenges, each focused on a positive value. Individuals can choose to host or participate in an existing challenge, or host a challenge of their own creation.

Now people from all walks of life are bringing these challenges to their companies and schools. A businessman hosted a mindfulness challenge in his office, and was pleasantly surprised when his colleagues agreed to start each group meeting with a moment of silent reflection. A preschool challenge began doing a moment of silence before their snack time, turning it into a period of silent gratitude for the farmers and unseen workers behind the food. Employee groups at several banks began signing up for an assortment of 21-day challenges centered on values like gratitude, and mindfulness in addition to kindness! At Harvard Divinity School, a graduating third year decided to ring out her final semester by hosting a challenge with nineteen of her classmates. This fall, the Greater Good Science Center at Berkeley hosted mindfulness and gratitude challenges as part of their online happiness course that reached over 100,000 people worldwide, while a documentary film team hosted their own 21-Day challenge, and issued a press release to invite all moviegoers to join in.

Pockets of families and friends embarked on their own challenges. Some collectively practiced 21 days of gratitude or kindness leading up to Thanksgiving. One mother-son duo signed up for a gratitude challenge together, and spent quality time each day, reading and reflecting on their fellow challenge participants' stories. Just last week, a 71-year-old decided to celebrate his birthday by hosting a challenge. And in Canada, a young couple asked their friends and family to engage in a 21-Day Kindness Challenge leading up to their wedding day!

It's beautiful to witness how small acts can shift the culture of an office, a school, a film experience or family. On the face of it, these are very small acts. Yet, their potential for transformation is huge. Science might say it's serotonin. Sociology might cite social conditions. As one social experiment by researchers at UC San Diego and Harvard University concluded, those who benefit from kindness find it contagious. In a "public goods" game they conducted, when one person gave money to help others, their recipients were more likely to give money away to new players in later rounds, and people's generosity would ripple out exponentially.

As a culture, we have tended to value size and scale as a key indicator of meaningful change. The stories here show the power of one individual shift, rippled out in a thousand directions. Historically people practicing small, consistent actions have triggered powerful ripples of change. Today, as compassion is applied to technology, it may be possible for

these ripples to build a current. Such a current would include millions of tiny lights, scaling in a very different way, towards change.

Join the upcoming 21-Day Simple Living Challenge on KindSpring!

Join thousands of others online for a 21-Day Simple Living Challenge that kicks off on Friday, January 9th. Simplicity isn't a sacrifice, but a celebration - watch as the ripples spread around you, one small act at a time.

Through this challenge, you'll receive a daily email with inspiration and ideas. You'll join a vibrant online community of like-minded people from all over the world, and you'll have a chance to share your experiences, read stories of what others are doing, and support each other's journeys along the way.