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Article

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Positive psychology techniques – Random Acts of Kindness and Consistent Acts of Kindness and Empathy

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Abstract

In this techniques paper we explain how using random acts of kindness can be built into consistent acts of kindness and empathy, helping clients build, hope, self regard as well as long term physical health.

Key words:

Random Acts of Kindness, RAK, Consistent acts of kindness, CAKE empathy, Positive psychology coaching (PPC).

Random acts of kindness

Random acts of kindness are selfless acts performed by a person wishing to either help or positively affect the emotional state (mood) of another person. Anne Herbert, a journalist, claims to have invented the phrase in a call to others to "*Practice random kindness and senseless acts of beauty*", back in 1982 while sitting in a restaurant in Sausalito, California. However, the idea certainly pre-dates positive psychology. It may be argued that kindness has its roots in religion. Jesus preached the idea of showing kindness not just to friends, but to those we don't like, those who have different values or lifestyles to us, and our enemies; "*If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them*" (Luke 6:32). Judaism too places a focus on kindness to others; "the world is built on kindness," while Buddhism talks of the importance of 'loving kindness'.

Psychological research evidence overwhelmingly confirms that RAK brings positive benefits to the individual giver, in terms of both mental and physical health gains (see Post, 2005 for a discussion of the research).

However, our experience in an individualistic world, where time is money, and the dominant culture is ‘*i-think*’, is that these elements are too often forgotten. The focus at work is often targets, outcomes and financial return, in contrast with employee well-being, customer experience, creating optimum shared value (Gross Domestic Happiness).

We suggest the random acts of kindness technique can be an antidote to this culture and the isolation that the focus on the self creates. RAK fits within Positive Psychology Coaching (PPC) and offers benefits if practiced by the coaching psychologist or coach, as well offering a technique that the coach can invite the coachee to undertake as homework exercises.

We might encourage the coachee to slow their pace, and to both savour each experience and to show appreciation to those they encounter – these are aspects of gratitude and savoring. These are a starting point for creating the right mind to undertaking acts for other people.

The nature of RAK is that their specific content cannot be prescribed, and the list of possible actions is limitless. One example is the viral video a few years ago of an on-duty US police officer who went into a store to buy socks and shoes for a homeless man he had just met on the street and who was barefoot. There are many other examples, you can check out the following three examples in Table 1.

Table 1: Make Yourself smile – some examples of RAK’s

Random Acts of Flowers	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YuMSpKpiHLQ
40 Acts for Lent	http://www.40acts.org.uk
Random Acts	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqe8sMTzrx0

In Table 2 we have set out a one week plan to help further develop RAK. Of course these need to be adapted to reflect the individual and their personal circumstances.

Table 2 Random Acts of Kindness - A one-week plan

Monday: Compliment one thing which you like on / about three people you meet during the day
Tuesday: Write a hand-written card to a boss or colleague to thank them for something they have done
Wednesday: Say good morning to each person you meet in the lift at work or the reception staff when you arrive at the building/s you are visiting that day.
Thursday: Pick up some litter and put it in the bin on your way to work
Friday: Use people's names (read their name badge) when talking to the staff in the canteen, café or coffee house and ask about their day.
Saturday: Place an uplifting note in library books or in a second hand book you are donating to a charity bookshop.
Sunday: Take flowers to a parent or a friend.

Using RAK's over a one-week period, as illustrated in Table 2, will provide psychological benefits to the giver, as well as benefits to the receiver. Much of the literature has focused on the random nature of these acts, which of course is useful.

However, we have suggested in this article and in our wider practice as coaching psychologists, the adoption of CAKE. This is a consistent approach to displaying acts of kindness to others through holding an empathetic stance towards all we meet, be they friends or those trying to do harm to us; from the person who cuts us up in traffic, to the colleague we see shouting at his staff.

CAKE encourages the individual to adopt this mind set, not just when the mood takes them, but as a permanent way of being. What we are really seeking is for the individual to think and act in this way in a more consistent basis. The aim in doing so is to build empathy towards others, why are they acting as they are, and to respond with empathy and kindness. One question we might ask ourself is 'what situation would cause me to behave in this way, or hold that opinion?'. By aiming to hold a more positive stance towards others, we can try to recognise, respect and celebrate others humanity and vulnerability, while at the same time cultivating humility in ourselves.

This attitudinal change requires the development of an adjustment from being i-centric towards a more 'we-centric' view of our relationships at home and work and adopting a similar view of all those we see and encourage.

Conclusion

This technique paper offers a simple approach, which can be used by the coach to foster empathy and loving kindness in themselves, as well as homework tasks to offer to the coachee for them to apply.

References

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