

How Your Tiny Actions Can Help Build a Kinder Society



“Microkindnesses,” like a smile, can spread from person to person and make an outsized impact on our sense of connection and belonging.

BY TIM LOMAS, TYLER J. VANDERWEELE | JULY 16, 2026



A smile in the hallway. A nod of recognition from a stranger. A quick word of thanks to the person bagging groceries. A brief pause to let another driver merge. These moments are so small that they often disappear almost as soon as they happen.



Yet they can change the feel of a day.

Most people know this from experience. A tense morning can soften when someone treats us with unexpected warmth. A crowded commute can feel less anonymous when another person makes space. A classroom, workplace, neighborhood, or family can become more humane through gestures that are almost too brief to record.

In a recent paper in the *International Journal of Wellbeing*, we use the term “microkindness” to describe these moments, though the word itself has appeared in earlier work. We define them as small gestures, motivated at least in part by genuine warm feelings toward others, that benefit someone else. These acts are brief, often lasting less than five seconds, and they involve little personal cost or risk to the person offering them.

That definition may sound modest. It is meant to be. Microkindness is not heroic sacrifice, sustained caregiving, or major generosity. It is the tiny act of human regard that passes from one person to another in ordinary life.

But the fact that microkindness is small does not mean it is trivial. Indeed, its smallness may be part of its importance. Because such acts are easy to perform, they are available almost everywhere. Because they are brief, they can occur many times a day. And because they are social, they may not stop with the first person who receives them.

The intriguing possibility is that microkindness may spread.

The flip side of microaggressions

The idea of microkindness partly arises as a counterpart to the better-known concept of microaggressions: brief, often everyday words or behaviors that communicate disrespect, exclusion, or contempt. One lesson from that literature is that small things can matter, especially when they accumulate. A single slight may be brushed aside. Repeated exposure can become a burden.

Microkindness invites a parallel question in the positive direction. If small acts can wound, can small acts also repair, include, affirm, or encourage?

This does not mean that a warm smile cancels out injustice, or that individual kindness is a substitute for structural change. The point is more precise: Daily social life is partly made out of small signals. Human beings constantly communicate whether others are welcome, noticed, respected, and safe. A microkindness is one way of sending a positive signal.

In a classroom, this might mean a teacher smiling warmly at a student. In a workplace, it might mean acknowledging someone's contribution in passing. In public, it might mean a brief friendly exchange with a cashier or neighbor. These moments do not ask much of us. But they can alter the emotional tone of an interaction.

They may also shape what others do next.

Kindness as something that travels

When people think about epidemiology, they usually think about disease: how viruses spread, who is most at risk, and how outbreaks can be prevented. But the broader tools of epidemiology can also be applied to positive states and behaviors. This is sometimes called positive epidemiology: the study of the distribution, causes, and spread of positive health-related qualities, not only illness and risk.

In the case of microkindness, the question becomes: Where do these small acts occur? What makes them more likely? Who receives them? Who is left out? Under what conditions do they ripple outward?

This way of thinking matters because kindness is often treated as a private moral choice. It is that, but it may also be a social phenomenon. People act within environments. A family, school, workplace, online platform, religious community, or neighborhood can facilitate kindness—or make it less likely to occur. Some settings invite warmth; others reward suspicion, speed, competition, or emotional distance.

Research on social networks suggests that emotions and behaviors can cluster and spread among people. Happiness, cooperation, and prosocial behavior are not merely individual traits floating in isolation. They can be shaped by relationships and social norms. If kindness operates in a similar way, then the smallest acts of goodwill may contribute to a larger social climate.

That does not mean kindness spreads automatically. A smile may be returned, ignored, or misread. A friendly gesture may land differently across cultures, contexts, or relationships. What feels warm in one setting may feel intrusive in another. The study of microkindness needs to take these complexities seriously.

Still, the possibility is worth investigating: Some acts of kindness may not only benefit the person who receives them. They may increase the chance that kindness continues.

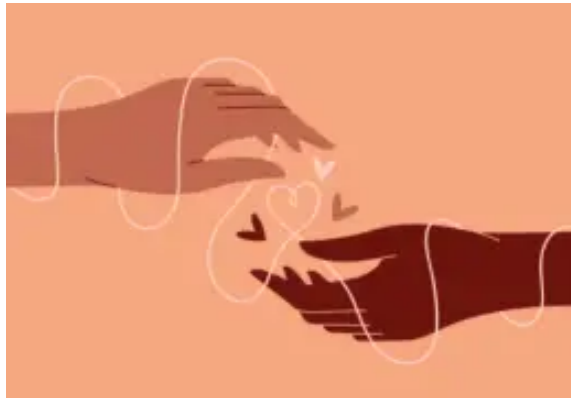
Why a smile may matter

Our paper focuses especially on smiling as an example of microkindness. This is not because every smile is kind. Some smiles are fake. Some may even express superiority or pleasure at another person's discomfort. Context matters.

But a genuine, kind smile is one of the clearest examples of a microkindness. It is brief. It costs little. It can communicate warmth, safety, recognition, and goodwill. It can be offered to people we know well and to people we barely know at all.

Smiling is also interesting because it is visibly social. A person's smile can elicit a smile in return. That returned smile can affect the next interaction. In this way, smiling offers a simple case for thinking about how microkindness might move through a room, a classroom, a gathering, or a community.

Imagine entering a meeting where no one looks up. The room feels closed. Now imagine entering the same meeting and being greeted by one person's warm smile. The agenda has not changed. The organization has not changed. But the social meaning of the moment has shifted. There is now a signal: You are seen. You belong here.



Spreading Love Through the Media

This piece is part of a three-year GGSC project to explore love's role in promoting social well-being, bridging divides, and contributing to a good, meaningful life. Such signals may be especially important in environments where people are uncertain about whether they are welcome. A student entering a new school, a patient in a medical office, a new employee on a first day, or an older adult entering a community event may all be scanning for cues. A microkindness can serve as one of those cues.

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This does not require exaggerating what a smile can do. It simply recognizes that human beings are relational creatures. Much of our well-being is shaped not only by major life events but by the

texture of daily contact.

Microkindness and flourishing

The Human Flourishing Program at Harvard defines flourishing broadly as the relative attainment of a state in which all aspects of life are good, including the contexts in which a person lives. Its framework often focuses on several domains: happiness and life satisfaction, physical and mental health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships, and financial and material stability.

Microkindness touches several of these at once.

It can support happiness, because warm social contact can lift the emotional tone of ordinary life. It can support mental health, not as a treatment in itself, but as one small part of a less hostile and more supportive social environment. It can support meaning, because offering kindness connects daily action to the good of another person. It can support character, because kindness is a habit of attending to others with goodwill. And it can support relationships, because relationships are built not only through major commitments but through repeated small gestures of care.

Microkindness is clearly not the whole of flourishing. But small acts are one part of the social world in which flourishing becomes more or less possible. They help create the atmosphere of a place. Over time, that atmosphere can influence what people expect from one another.

What this means in daily life

The practical implications of microkindness are intentionally modest, but not insignificant.

First, microkindness asks people to notice the many small opportunities for goodwill already built into the day. These are not elaborate interventions. They are brief acts of recognition: smiling, greeting, thanking, acknowledging, encouraging, or making space.

“Microkindnesses are brief acts of recognition: smiling, greeting, thanking, acknowledging, encouraging, or making space”

—Tim Lomas, Ph.D., and Tyler VanderWeele, Ph.D

Second, it suggests that kindness may be especially powerful when it becomes part of a culture rather than an isolated act. A classroom in which students are greeted warmly, a workplace where people routinely acknowledge one another, or a community gathering where newcomers are welcomed may become an “epicenter” of microkindness. The goal is not forced cheerfulness. It is a shared norm of humane attention.

Third, it points to the role of institutions and media environments. If microkindness can spread, then the environments that shape attention matter. News and social media often amplify outrage, threat, and conflict. A healthier information environment might also make room for stories and signals of kindness, not as sentimental distraction, but as part of the social ecology that affects public life.

Finally, microkindness calls for humility. A gesture intended as kind is not always received that way. Cultural norms, power dynamics, prior experiences, and context all influence interpretation. Studying microkindness well will require attention not only to the person offering the act, but also to the person receiving it.

A small beginning toward a better world

The study of microkindness is still new. Our paper is an invitation to research, which asks whether the tools used to study the spread of disease might also help us understand the spread of kindness. It asks whether small gestures deserve more scientific attention. It asks whether societies concerned about polarization, loneliness, and distrust should pay closer attention to the brief moments in which people communicate goodwill.

That may seem like a small place to begin, but much of life happens in small places: in doorways, sidewalks, classrooms, checkout lines, waiting rooms, emails, meetings, and glances across a room.

A kinder society will require more than microkindness. It will require justice, patience, courage, forgiveness, strong institutions, and serious commitments to the common good. Still, the path toward such a society may be shaped, in part, by what people repeatedly communicate to one another in passing.

A smile. A greeting. A thank you. A moment of recognition.

Small acts may be bigger than we think.

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