

## A Skill for Living Well: Kindness

Until now, this book has dealt with key skills for *learning*. This final section focuses on a key skill for *living*—a skill that, if practiced, can make your pursuit of learning much more rewarding.

In his book *The Big Picture*, Dr. Ben Carson devotes an entire chapter to the idea that people should “be nice.” He comments, “It is such an elementary concept, but I probably get as much reaction to this topic as anything I speak about—whether from an audience of corporate executives or of inner-city kids. The reaction just underscores the importance of this seemingly simple idea.”

Why be nice, or kind? One reason, according to Dr. Carson, is that “you can get more done by being nice.” If you’re kind to other students and to your instructors, they’re more likely to be considerate to you. That can make your academic life more productive and satisfying.

A second reason for being kind, again according to Dr. Carson, is that “everyone is worth it.” Dr. Carson comments: “We like to think of America as a classless society, but if we are honest, we have to admit that we are divided into many categories—ethnically, economically, educationally, socially, geographically, and in other ways. Being nice to everyone is the simplest way I know to effectively lower the artificial barriers human beings have erected.” All of us—regardless of our age, the color of our skin, our income, or our physical appearance—share a common humanity. Being kind to one another is a way to recognize that our shared humanity is more important than the individual differences between us.

A third reason for treating others with consideration was expressed many centuries ago by the Greek philosopher Philo of Alexandria. In an observation that has endured through the ages, he wrote:

Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.

I showed this statement to a number of students while I was interviewing them for this book. Here are some of their responses.

**Michelle:** *“Philo’s words are as true as the air we breathe. We’re always dealing with something. You may think people are mean or nasty, but you don’t know what’s going on inside. We can’t read people; we don’t know their hearts. It’s the heart that causes everything. We’re always so concerned about our own situation; we’re always so worried about ourselves. We have to allow for what’s inside others. A kind look, a word, a hug can completely change the course of how a person is feeling.”*



Michelle Miller



Ryan Klootwyk

**Ryan:** *“Amen. If you haven’t fought a battle, you will. Lots of people have hurdles you don’t even know about. Everybody is struggling; everyone has issues. Life is not a la-di-da walk through the park. Life isn’t easy. We have to care for one another.”*



Jasmin Santana

**Jasmin:** *“All of us are fighting the battle of survival. Everyone is trying to get by, and we should do our best to remember this.”*



Aaron Benson

**Aaron:** *“It’s like the saying about walking a mile in another person’s shoes. It means giving people the benefit of the doubt. The more you learn about them, the more you can understand them. You don’t know what happens to people right before you encounter them. You really never know what people are going through.”*

**Paul:** *“Be a good person, be respectful, because you don’t know what people are dealing with. They’re having their own problems. You don’t want to be judgmental, because you haven’t lived that person’s life. Being kind is a virtue. And when others see you being kind, they’ll treat you so in return. It’s infectious.”*



Paul Blocker

It may help to think of kindness as a muscle, just as all the learning skills in this book can be seen as muscles. Kindness has to be practiced to become effective and strong and natural. Practicing this human skill, like practicing the learning skills, can make you a better, happier person.

## ACTIVITIES

1. Most people agree that it is important to try to be kind, but they become distracted by the hectic nature of everyday life and often forget to work at kindness. Describe someone you know who does an exceptional job at being kind. What is your own attitude about kindness? Do you make a conscious effort to give people the benefit of the doubt? If you don't, do you think you should?
2. Try this experiment: Make a deliberate effort to be kind to at least three different people in the course of the next day. Your behavior can be as simple as listening carefully, smiling, holding open a door, or doing a small favor. Afterward, comment on what it was like—how people reacted and how you felt.
3. Another observation that has endured through the ages comes from the Talmudic scholar Rabbi Hillel over two thousand years ago:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

And if I am only for myself, what am I?

And if not now, when?

What do you think Rabbi Hillel meant? How do his words relate to the importance of personal responsibility? How do his words relate to the importance of kindness?