

How A Little Courtesy Makes A Big Difference (for Your Brain and Other People)

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In today's fast-paced world, it seems we have all but forgotten the value of courtesy. We tailgate slow drivers on the freeway, ignore our phone calls, take our frustrations out on a frazzled (but innocent) waiter. While incivility may be our first reaction to life's inconveniences, it ultimately fuels negative consequences for ourselves and those around us. According to Dr. Douglas Fields, "People (and animals) living together in large numbers must develop strict formalized behaviors governing interactions between all individuals in the group, or there will be strife and chaos."

Indeed, strife and chaos are arguably the reigning zeitgeist of the 21st century. In France, rudeness was even reported as the chief cause of stress, ranking at 60 percent, in a recent poll, placing it well above concerns over the debt crisis or persistent rates of double-digit unemployment. Neuroeconomist Paul J. Zak has proposed that rudeness creates activity in the pain-sensing regions of our brains, leading to aggression as the brain releases amounts of testosterone in response. Rudeness among strangers in the street is bad enough, but it can be truly detrimental in the workplace, according to a University of Maryland study that linked incivility to decreased job performance and satisfaction, diminished health and well-being, and reported turnover intentions.

On the other hand according to Zak, when we respect one another, we release oxytocin into the brain and expand our social network, which in effect allows us to lead healthier,

happier, and more productive lives. So what exactly passes for courtesy in a demanding, high-tech world? Follow these tips to become a more polite person — and be the beginning of a happier and healthier world that's a bit more bearable for all of us.

At its most basic level, courtesy means saying “please” and “thank you” — and genuinely meaning these phrases. A study described by Dr. Craig Dowden asked participants to review a cover letter (written by a fictional university student named “Eric”). Eric thanked half of the readers for their help on a class assignment, then asked them to review another one of his projects. He asked the rest of the readers for help, but didn't include them in his “thank you.” The researchers found that 66 percent of the people who were thanked by Eric agreed to help a second time, compared to the reluctant 32 percent who were not thanked. When the participants received an email asking for help from a different student the next day, their experience of being thanked or not thanked by Eric affected their willingness to help someone else. It would seem that a little thanks can go a long way in motivating individuals to lend (and to keep lending) a helping hand.

It means reciprocating when someone does a favor for you. When your new neighbor welcomes you with cookies, invite them over for dinner. When your friend watches your dogs while you're on vacation, bring them back a nice bottle of wine. “Oxytocin is the embodiment of the Golden Rule,” says Zak. They do something nice for you (release of oxytocin); you do something nice for them (release of oxytocin). Relationships are strengthened, and the quality of life is improved.

Remember internet etiquette. Courtesy seems a bit different on a computer screen that everyone can safely hide behind. Dr. Jennifer Verdolin lists some important rules of civility to remember when using the internet: “Think twice about emailing about business outside of business hours, don't post glorious photos of yourself if they also include an unflattering pose by a friend, and don't post your politics on your friend's Facebook wall without asking first.” Exercising digital politeness means erring on the side of caution and, as always, remembering the Golden Rule.

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