

How to be NICE!

7 Little Ways to Elevate Any Interaction (Plus 3 What-Ifs)

By Elly V. Darwin

It's not rocket science. Being nice is merely a decision to put small things into practice. Definitions of *nice* include the words kind, pleasant, friendly, enjoyable, etc. "Be nice!" said your mother. "Be nice!" said your teachers. "Be nice!" says just about everyone. "Ok, but how do I do that?" Here are seven little things you can do to land yourself in the Nice column.

1. Smile. I know that sounds trite because everybody says it. And it's hard to go through a day without seeing the iconic yellow smiley face that graphic artist Harvey Ball first created back in 1963. But think about it: Would you rather be greeted with a smile or a scowl? No words need be exchanged. A smile merely conveys, "You matter enough for me to make a kind facial expression." And depending on the circumstance, adding a simple "Hi" doesn't hurt, either.

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With a smile or a scowl?

2. Say Thank You. Thanking people is not only another way of saying you matter, it's acknowledging that they did something of value. It doesn't have to be a big thing, and it's often something they're required to do anyway, like bagging your groceries or delivering your mail. Thank you often means

even more when three little words are added: "I appreciate it." This is especially important when ordinary circumstances turn difficult, such as during bad weather or the holiday rush.

3. Make it about them, not you. Other people have feelings. Other people may be working under stress.

They don't deserve to have your own stress dumped on them. (Save that for your therapist, your journal, or perhaps your closest coffee

buddy.) The checker at the store is probably trained to say, "How're you doing?" when they begin your transaction. During particularly busy times, such as the holiday rush, I enjoy replying, "I'm good—and how are YOU holding up?" My reply with eye contact and a smile says I sympathize. Just because somebody has a mundane job doesn't mean they don't appreciate a little appreciation.

4. Keep a cheerful tone. When we were very young, my older brother demonstrated the power of tone of voice. Saying, "Hey, watch this," he turned to our dog, Tootsie, and said in a very stern, scolding tone, "Good dog!" Not knowing what she did wrong, Tootsie lowered her head and tucked her tail. Then my brother immediately followed with a sweet, approving voice, "Aww, bad dog!" Tootsie immediately perked back up and

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wagged her tail. We've all experienced the cashier who completes the transaction, hands you the receipt, and without looking at you, says, "Have a nice day" in a disinterested monotone. Translation: "I don't care; I'm just required to say that." My wonderfully ebullient grandmother always spoke in a cheerful tone. I loved that about her.

5. Be respectful. It's simple. They're human. You may not agree with them, you may not even like them very much, but everyone deserves a baseline of respect. I've always thought it interesting, if not even amusing, that even the most despicable criminal is referred to as "Mr." (or Mrs., Ms., Dr.) in court proceedings and in the press.

6. Be patient. Unless you're rushing to the hospital with a bleeding child, there's no reason not to show a little patience. The server has other tables. The staff may be shorthanded. Businesses do not deliberately induce long lines just to annoy you. One car length doesn't make all that much difference. One morning during rush hour I saw two commuters aggressively jockeying for position at the onramp merge point. Neither one would give literally an inch until they ultimately scraped fenders. Both men jumped out of their vehicles and duked it out right there on the shoulder of the freeway—for one car length! Which brings me to #7:

7. Chill. I love the fifth of Steven Covey's famous *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*: "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." Sometimes even very challenging encounters can be mollified by simply calming down. Step back emotionally, speak kindly and respectfully, and ask for clarification as needed before being directive. Besides calming yourself, your kind

demeanor has a good chance of rubbing off on others.

"That's all great," you may say, "but what if...?"

3 Common What Ifs

1. It's easy to do these things when you're in a great mood, but what if you're not? Then think of it as role play. Imagine an actor showing up on stage and instead of delivering

the scripted funny line, saying, "I'm really bummed today, and I don't feel like being

funny." No, the show must go on, and the actor delivers the line on cue anyway. In that regard, there's a grain of truth to "fake it till you make it." If you're willing to push through your own feelings in an effort to elevate the mood of others, you may just discover that your own mood comes along for the ride.

2. It feels good to see that your kindness lifts up others, but what if they don't respond as you had hoped? Well, then that's their choice. You made the effort. Don't let it stop you from a pleasant interaction with the next person you encounter.

3. What if the person has a bumper sticker on their car for a candidate you despise? Or is dressed inappropriately? Or has weird tattoos? Or who's off-putting in some other way. It doesn't matter. They're still human and still deserve respect. In a way, you really are doing this for yourself. You're doing this because you choose to be a nice person. Don't let *their* personal choices determine what kind of person *you* choose to be.

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Of course, there are certain situations where someone is completely out of line, or even aggressive or erratic, and it is really better (or safer) to keep to yourself. That's not only OK but sometimes even wise. You can always simply send others goodness from your heart, or even pray for them, without any outward gestures or words. But there's no need to sour yourself because of them.

How much money do these things cost? How much special clothing or equipment is needed? How much advanced scheduling is required? These things are easy and only take a moment. It's just a matter of thinking about them.

Many years ago I made a decision that I would make every interaction with another person a positive one, whether I knew the person or not. Along the way I discovered a wonderful "secret" to happiness: The more I did that, the better I felt. Even when I've had to correct someone's behavior (or even fire employees), I've tried to do it in a way that explains rather than ridicules and allows them to preserve their dignity. It may have

been a little yucky having to do it, but I could at least feel that I handled an unpleasant situation in the best way possible. There's absolutely no need to lower my own dignity by rubbing salt in the wound.

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Being nice is one of those things that starts with a series of small decisions, repeated over time until they become habit, and then become a permanent part of your personality and overall disposition. It's not rocket science. It doesn't cost anything. And you can start today.



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