

Challenge 1: Reverse the Golden Rule

The golden rule many of us have heard since childhood demands that we treat others the way we'd like to be treated. Unfortunately, we often don't apply this adage in reverse! We frequently blame ourselves for even the slightest failure—often in circumstances where we would be compassionate and understanding towards someone else who made the identical mistake we did. This toxic perfectionism may feel all too familiar to you, and can be a precursor to anxiety, depression, and feelings of social isolation.

The Challenge: Try reversing the golden rule by treating yourself the way you would treat other people. Think back to a recent failure, or a time you disappointed yourself, and visualize approaching yourself as if you were a close friend or family member. What would you say to yourself? How would you feel about a loved one, and how would you want to make that person feel? Try directing that same lens back on yourself—trying to give the same grace and compassion to yourself that you'd give to someone you love.

Reflection: Was your initial reaction to be harder on yourself than a loved one? Does reversing the golden rule nurture self-compassion? How can you catch yourself engaging in self-blame and counteract this in the future?

Challenge 2: Spend Kindly

Kindness can feel like a draining transfer: one person decides to spend (money, energy, emotional labor) to help someone else. Seen this way, helping becomes like a luxury. When we're strapped for cash or time, we have no surplus to give away. During times of stress, our own problems take priority over stopping to empathize with someone else seems emotionally unaffordable.

The Challenge: Research suggests that this is all backwards! People feel happier and less stressed after engaging in a generous act. Giving away time and energy has the same effect on the mind. As the timeless proverb states, "a bit of fragrance clings to the hand that gives flowers." Make a choice to spend on someone else. This can be money (treating someone to a coffee), but it doesn't have to be. You can spend time listening to a friend in need even if you feel you're too busy to do so, or notice that someone seems bothered and inquire as to why, with genuine interest.

Reflection: How did giving when you thought you couldn't make you feel? Depleted? Refreshed? Energetic? Some other feeling? How can you replicate acts of generosity in other areas of your life?

Challenge 3: Disagree Better

Politics can divide families and start wars. Individuals on the left and right increasingly regard each other with fear and loathing, and the hot topic of the day can be a significant source of social discord. Empathizing across this chasm can seem like a waste of time and a betrayal of our ideals. However, empathy is not the same as condoning someone's beliefs—it merely entails trying to understand them better. One way to do so is by going beyond an opinion to the person underneath: the fears, hopes and memories that shape what they believe.

The Challenge: Seek out and speak with someone who disagrees with you. Start by asserting your respective positions, however don't just stop there! Rather than debating your views, tell each other the story of how you came to have them in the first place. Try to cultivate and display curiosity about this person, rather than jumping to judgment.

Reflection: Did this approach lead to a more productive discussion than you would have had otherwise? Why or why not? Were you surprised by anything you learned?

Challenge 4: Be a Culture Builder

People are more likely to exhibit cruelty and indifference when others around us do. Conversely, we're also more likely to flex our kindness and empathy when others do, too. When we encourage callousness or kindness, we lend them social momentum. The late novelist Amos Oz described combating hatred as akin to fire-fighting. "Bring a bucket of water and throw it on the fire, and if you don't have a bucket, bring a glass, and if you don't have a glass, use a teaspoon, everyone has a teaspoon. And yes, I know a teaspoon is little and the fire is huge but there are millions of us and each one of us has a teaspoon."

The Challenge: Use the power of social norms for good by reinforcing or challenging others' behaviour. If you see someone acting kindly or empathetically, recognize and reward that. If you see someone acting cruelly or indifferently, challenge them.

Reflection: Does it feel uncomfortable and intrusive to voice a norm to others, or does it come naturally? Do you think your actions made a difference?

Challenge 5: Kind Tech

Technology—and social media in particular—are the 21st century's most infamous empathy killer. These platforms reduce rich and diverse thought into strings of 280 character text and curated images, and favor narcissism and outrage over genuine connection. However, online technology isn't inherently antisocial. Recent research suggests it can increase human empathy. The trick is using it to enhance, rather than replace, offline interactions.

The Challenge: Be intentional about how you use your time on line. Instead of seeking approval or shaming others, find someone you haven't interacted with in a while and send them a message, or find someone who's struggling and provide a voice of support.

Reflection: Did this make your internet time feel different than usual? If so, how, and how could you keep this up?

Content adapted from Jamil Zaki, author of *The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World*. Zaki is a professor of psychology at Stanford University and the director of the Stanford Social Neuroscience Lab. Using tools from psychology and neuroscience, he and his colleagues examine how empathy works and how people can empathize more effectively.

(<https://www.warforkindness.com/challenges>)