

# Conversations for Kindness

Kindness and our education systems

21 September 2023

# Contents

<b>Context</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Insights from Ed Fidoe</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Insights from James Handscombe</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Group discussion</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Further resources</b>	<b>11</b>

## About the movement

**Conversations for Kindness** is a monthly virtual meeting that was set up in the summer of 2020 by eight colleagues and friends working in healthcare across Sweden, the UK and the USA: Bob Klaber, Dominique Allwood, Maureen Bisognano, Goran Henriks, Suzie Bailey, Anette Nilsson, Gabby Matthews and James Mountford. The purpose of the meeting was to have some time together to continue some initial conversations around kindness, and its role at the 'business end' of healthcare, and to plan interactive workshops on this topic.

## Conversations for Kindness

- Monthly Zoom call on the third Thursday of every month (6-7pm GMT)
- A focus on listening, learning, thinking differently and mobilising for action
- An open culture of sharing of resources, energy and ideas

**If you would like to join the conversation for kindness, please complete [this contact form](#)**

# On the day: coming together from across the world

More than **40** Kindness in Healthcare community members came together from all over the world for this Conversation for Kindness - if you missed it, you can [watch the video of it](#)



James Mountford coordinated our session today. For the first time as a group, **our topic of conversation shifted away from healthcare and into education.**

We heard from two speakers, **Ed Fidoe and James Handscombe, who both spoke to their experiences with kindness in different educational settings.**

We then spent time as a wider group reflecting, prompted by a Taylor Swift song lyric shared by James M.

# Insights from Ed Fidoe...

Ed spoke to us first about balancing kindness with rules in a university context. He is founder of the [London Interdisciplinary School](#), a university that opened in 2021 where teaching is not limited to disciplines - instead, learning is organised around complex problems.



Kindness is a core value of the London Interdisciplinary School but Ed shared with us where it is hardest to live up to this. In the university context, there's a challenge in being accommodating for students' mental health and flexing deadlines but also holding students to account and enabling them to achieve. This is not a new problem but feels very pertinent at the moment.



In regards to holding people to account, Ed spoke about doing this through kindness. He shared an experience of challenging the staff of LIS to a two-day residential full of rules, an excessive and unrealistic amount of them, that essentially ensured the rules would be broken. Ed told us that a key takeaway was when you start to feel the effects of rules, it makes you feel more empathetic about imposing rules on others.



# Insights from James Handscombe

James spoke to us about **Harris Westminster Sixth Form**, a school in central London that prioritises “bright kids who come from disadvantage...a school that is all about clever and has some kids with big challenges” that opened in 2014.

They asked themselves, ‘to be all about clever - what does this mean?’ and set about developing a definition based on the idea of scholarship. “Scholarship is the pursuit of knowledge that is extensive and exact, and thinking that is scrupulous and critical”. James explained how whole school assemblies once a week are a place to talk about what it means to be a student at HWSF, on this path and understanding that they are a community who are working together on this pursuit.



James also spoke about developing a language of kindness in the school and being in the business of teaching kindness through helping teach students how to be better people.

# Group discussion, inspired by Taylor Swift

Following Ed and James' perspectives, we were given a provocation to reflect on, which happened to be a line from a Taylor Swift song:

*“never be so kind, you forget to be clever and never be so clever, you forget to be kind”...*

**Maureen** shared an experience from a recent visit to a high school in the US, where on the first day of school, each student writes a letter to the person who means the most to them in the world. All these letters were hung up on the wall all year. If the student misbehaves, instead of being sent to detention, the teacher would take the student outside and get them to read their letter out loud. The students said that being reminded of their bigger life and reconnecting with that meaning allowed them to reflect on their behaviour and make changes to prevent this from happening again.

**Rachel** shared how the difference between being kind and nice can be seen when we shy away from having difficult conversations and holding people to account.

# Further insights from the group discussion...

**Bimbi** reflected on the quote and shared how as a surgeon, there are times where cleverness is required over kindness in tricky situations. But there are times where it swings the other way. It is dynamic and patients require you to be clever but kindness should be the bedrock of everything you do.

**James** shared that teaching kindness can happen by:

1. What you say
2. What you do
3. What you model

**Suzie** spoke about her experience of working on a team where important information on an important subject was being delivered without people having seen it ahead of the meeting, which felt neither kind nor clever.

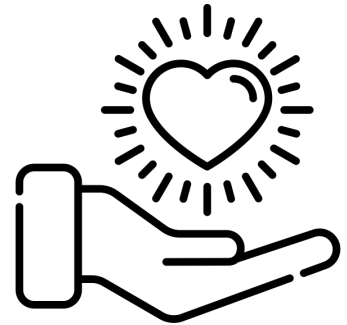
**Fred** shared how from his perspective, in the past, the focus has definitely been more on cleverness and kindness and he is pleased to see this even out more and more.



# Reflections from Bob

Bob also shared three thoughts for our reflection:

1. Thinking about how we can have 'difficult conversations' in a kind way. It is possible to communicate acceptable standards of behaviour or expectations in a way that is clear and firm, yet kind.
2. The more you teach kindness, the more space it gives you for self reflection about your own behaviour
3. Gendered expectations of kindness - recognising historic societal expectations can play into assumptions about what kindness 'should' look like.



# Reflections from the chat...

During the session, members of the Kindness in Healthcare community shared thoughts, ideas and reflections in chat. A selection has been captured below...

“The difference between “niceness” and “kindness” is night and day, yet people often use these two words interchangeably, assuming that they’re “basically the same thing.””

“I think empathy is the pain you feel when you see someone in need and kindness is the action you take to respond.”

“Doing nothing isn't kind - kindness is active. Also kindness is thinking about what's best for the other person”

“...that reminds me of the key idea to encourage people to “be generous” ....ie assume good intent (or at least don't assume mal-intent)”

“Some of the smartest people I know are also some of the kindest - and lean into the conversations that need to happen”

“The other point I so believe in with kindness-once you act with kindness, it comes back to make you feel better as well. Teaching kindness will make teachers more filled with joy as well.”

“I'm a firm believer in this - true kindness, rather than just nice agreeability - requires hard thinking, cleverness.”

# Final thoughts from the chat...

“Well done James and Ed - it is refreshing and lovely to hear about the amazing work that you are doing with our future pillars of society”

“Thanks so much as always everybody. Always uplifted and inspired after these calls.”

“Thanks so much all... enjoyed the provocation and stimulating thoughts too - appreciated this conversation very much”

Thanks a million to you all! A wonderful meeting. Much food for thought and reflection and practice!

“Bob, thanks for raising our need to act when we see unkind behaviors. This is just as vital as being kind.”

“I went to HWSF (currently in final year of medical school). Really interesting hearing this discussion. I'll certainly be reflecting on this, thanks all.”

“Thank you for a really interesting, stimulating talk. This was my first time attending and already looking forward to the next one. So pleased I heard about this at the RCPCH conference”

# Further resources

*During the session, participants also shared relevant resources they recommended to others, including:*

- This [article](#) about Nice vs. Kind – What Is the Difference Between Niceness & Kindness?
- This [opinion piece](#) reflecting on the General Medical Council publishing the latest version of Good Medical Practice including guidance to be kind.
- This [article](#) about Empathy in Medical Education, Can 'Kindness' Be Taught, Learned and Assessed?
- This copy of [Compassionomics](#) - Compelling new research shows that healthcare is in the midst of a compassion crisis.

# Acknowledgements

This insights pack has been co-produced by  
**Nicki Macklin** and the team at **Kaleidoscope Health and Care**

For all enquiries please contact us [via the Kindness in Healthcare website](#) or email  
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See you next month for another great Conversation.