

# A Su Salud

To your health

## Kindness: A Natural High



In looking at my National Health and Wellness Observances Calendar, I noted that February 13 – 19 is Random Acts of Kindness Week. Who knew? I then googled “random acts of kindness” and actually found the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation’s website. Again, who knew? And finally, I learned that there are positive health benefits to being kind. For the third time, who knew?

According to the website numerous scientific studies over the last 50 years have shown that doing good deeds have positive health benefits. It all started with Dr. Hans Selye’s revolutionary book, The Stress of Life, published in 1956. Dr. Selye actually “invented” the term *stress*. He discovered that long-term effects of stress could lead to such health problems as high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, and a decreased immune system. His antidote for reducing the unhealthy effects of stress was to do good things for yourself and others. He called this behavior *altruistic egoism*.

Volunteerism is one form of doing good things for others. Many of the research studies use volunteerism as a measure of kindness. For example, one 10-year study of 2,700 men found that the men who volunteered on a regular basis had death rates two and a half times lower than those who didn’t volunteer. Researchers have found that being altruistic (kind, selfless, thoughtful, etc) can lower blood pressure, lower heart rates, reduce feelings of depression, reduce chronic pain and basically contributes to overall good mental and physical health.

I have a very fond memory of a random act of kindness. Several years before my father passed away, my parents visited me from Massachusetts. This trip was the first (and only) time my father, who was in his 70’s, had ever been on a plane. One day we were driving back over the Bay Bridge and as I rolled up to



the tollbooth, the toll taker told me that the car in front of us had paid our toll. We were taken aback, and for the remainder of the drive we wondered who the person was and why he or she would have done such a nice thing. That random act of kindness stood out as one of my father’s favorite memories of his trip.

In her book, Happiness: How to Find It and Keep It, Joan Duncan Oliver has this to say about kindness. “Kindness is one of the most undervalued commodities—which is too bad because it doesn’t take much of it to turn the day around. I wonder if we overlook kindness because it’s so simple. What’s really involved? Someone needs something; we help. Someone feels low; we console. Someone trips; we catch them. There’s a need; we respond. Then the other person is grateful and relieved—and we’re happy knowing we could help. Kindness is a low-effort, high-return exchange.”

So, celebrate Random Acts of Kindness Week by doing something nice for someone else. You may be surprised at how good it makes you feel.



## Playing it Safe(r)

Valentine’s Day is fast approaching. February 14 is also the beginning of National Condom Week. This is a perfect time to have a heart to heart talk about sex with Randy Lomax, husband, counselor and instructor of Human Sexuality.

### What is safe sex?

The term refers to reducing one’s risk of unintended pregnancy and of spreading sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Many people use the term “safe sex” but it should really be “safer sex” because many forms of physical contact with another person result in sharing bodily fluids. If you practice *safer* sex, you are aware that there are risks and you assess those risks and act



responsibly. Sexual risk runs along a continuum from low-risk activities like holding hands, to very high-risk activities such as not using a condom during anal intercourse. Acting responsibly is about making the healthiest

decision for you. We all have our own moral compass, based on a variety of influences and experiences.

### **Assessing one's risk presumes that you know what sexually transmitted infections are and how they are transmitted, as well as how and when pregnancy occurs.**

True. If you don't understand the consequences of your sexual behavior, then you *really* ought to ask yourself if you should be engaging in that sexual behavior. I tell my students that having sex with someone you just met at a party is very different from deciding to have sex with someone you've been dating for a long time. You know the person you're dating and presumably you've both talked about past sexual experiences so that you both have a general idea of your sexual histories. If you choose to have sex with someone you've just met, you need to be aware that a greater element of risk exists. Casual sex increases risks because, among other things, you don't know the person's sexual past.



### **How do you define *abstinence*?**

Many studies have shown that abstinence means different things to different people. One study asked both students and health professionals which behaviors—ranging from kissing to anal sex—they would define as being abstinent behaviors. Both groups' definitions of abstinence varied widely. The narrowest definition of abstinence is simply no penile/vaginal contact. As long as the penis doesn't enter into the vagina, you are being abstinent. A person who defines abstinence in this way might engage in oral sex or even anal sex and still think he or she is being abstinent. Anal and oral sex are not risk-free activities. Abstinence, like other forms of birth control, has to be practiced correctly.



**Jane Brody, a newspaper columnist who writes about health, included a recent study of condom use among 779 sexually active women who were 18-24 years old. The study showed that 59% of the women waited until after initial penetration before using a condom, putting themselves at risk for both STIs and pregnancy! What do you say to that?**

I think it shows how difficult it is to implement behavior change. We've done a good job increasing knowledge and awareness, but behavior change—actually using the condom correctly each and every time you have sex—is still our challenge. Carelessness and embarrassment are two big factors, and the use of drugs and alcohol is bigger still. Being under the influence of drugs or alcohol can greatly alter your ability to assess your risk and act responsibly.

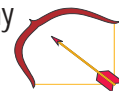
### **What are the three most important things you think students should know about safer sex?**

The first is to act responsibly. By this I mean that you are able to think clearly without the influence of alcohol and drugs, you can assess your risks and respond appropriately. Second, that you are engaging in healthy behavior, meaning that what you do won't undermine how you or your partner is going to feel about yourselves. And finally, that you enjoy yourself. As long as you have satisfied the first two conditions, sexual activity should be a pleasurable, happy and fulfilling act.



You mustn't force sex to do the work of love, or love to do the work of sex.

Mary McCarthy



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