



PODCAST #13 – KINDNESS IS REVOLUTIONARY



by Carolyn Spring

Hi there! I'm Carolyn Spring and welcome to my podcast where I talk about all things trauma. I dig into the nuts and bolts of trauma, how we can recover, what blocks us, and all things neuroscience-y - what actually goes on in the body and brain during and after trauma, especially from the perspective of evolutionary neurobiology. This podcast is for anyone who's experienced trauma, or knows someone who has, which is pretty much everyone. For more podcasts, blogposts, books and training check out my website at carolynspring.com.

Hello, friends! Carolyn Spring here and welcome to my podcast, 'Kindness is revolutionary'.

There's a hashtag circulating the internet at the moment - #BeKind or #BeKinder - following the tragic suicide of TV presenter Caroline Flack at the weekend. And these two topics - kindness and

suicide - are very very close to my heart. No-one ever killed themselves from an overdose of kindness - but a lot of people do kill themselves when they're exposed to horrific, ongoing, chronic levels of unkindness. And it's just not on. In its most simplistic terms, abuse is extreme unkindness. Of course that feels like a massive understatement to call it that, and abuse has many layers and dynamics on top of unkindness, but I want to just join the dots here that kindness and abuse sit on diametrically opposite ends of the spectrum of how we treat people. Therefore healing from trauma, from abuse, must include a tonne of kindness.

And yet we live in a society that increasingly, especially online, seems to be full of unkindness - levels of unkindness and online bullying and trolling that drive people even to their deaths. And even in small ways it's there, constantly, every



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day, for every non-celebrity too – anyone with an online presence, even if you're just commenting about parking problems in a neighbourhood Facebook group. People having a go, pulling you down, attacking you, shaming you, humiliating you, all in the name of 'having an opinion' and 'commenting'.

And it is devastating to do life listening to unkindness. It is demoralising to know that there are people attacking you and criticising you and shaming you for no other reason – really – than that they are being unkind. I think very often when someone is unkind to us – this certainly is my struggle – we take that unkindness on board, as if it says something about us. It's a case of, 'Oh, you've found me out! You've uncovered my intrinsic toxicity, my evilness – you are treating me as I deserve.' When someone is unkind to us, we think it's an indictment of us as a human being. But it's not. It says nothing about us. It says everything about the person who is being unkind. And that realisation ultimately is what has helped me the most. People are unkind towards me and others because they are unkind, not because what they say is true or fair or justified – even if it is.

We need to stand up to unkindness and call it out as unkindness – not lend it credence by agreeing that it is okay for someone to call me fat because I am in fact fat; or tell me that I'm a failure because I did in fact fail; or that

my writing is crap because sometimes some of it is indeed crap; or point out my mistakes because I am most certainly a human being who makes lots of mistakes. These things are unkind to say whether or not they are true. It is the unkindness that needs to be challenged, not our imperfections. We cannot outrun the unkindness of others by trying instead to be perfect – that is a strategy that will chase us all the way to our graves. Because none of us is perfect, and we're not meant to be perfect. We're destined to be imperfect human beings. And we need to be kind to one other, and to be kind to ourselves – to forgive ourselves and others for our imperfections, not be condemned for them.

Because unkindness has a profound impact on us and on our mental health. Too often I think we've been told that if people's unkindness impacts us, then that's our problem. That we're too thin-skinned, that we're too sensitive. But even that's a bit unkind. The entire reason I do the work I do is because I care deeply about people's suffering. Well, I have to be quite thin-skinned in order to care about other people's suffering. I have to have a soft, permeable membrane, for that suffering to penetrate my heart and motivate me to action. If I were thick-skinned I would be less sensitive to the hurt of others towards me, but I'd also be less sensitive to hurt full stop. So I don't think it's a problem for me, or others like me, to be sensitive and thin-



skinned. I think the problem is more that unkindness is unkind. And people who are unkind want to justify it by blaming the victim of it for being too sensitive. No – let's just deal with the unkindness itself, shall we? Let's stop that. Let's not be unkind by blaming the victims of unkindness for being impacted by it because they're too sensitive.

Because unkindness is so unnecessary. For all that we may claim our rights of freedom of speech and freedom of opinion, it is still unnecessary to be unkind. It doesn't achieve anything. It's not productive. It helps no-one. When an anonymous stranger somewhere from the internet tells me that my writing is crap, that they hate it, that doesn't make me a better writer. It doesn't motivate me; it doesn't help me improve. So what's the point? Why don't they just stop reading my writing instead, and go and read something else? They're perfectly entitled not to enjoy my writing, even to hate it. I've got no problem with that. But what they should do with that realisation is change *their* behaviour – to stop reading what I'm writing and go and find something else that they do enjoy reading. It's just unkind to message me to tell me that I'm a worthless individual and a crap writer. It's unkind, and it's unnecessary.

There are probably at least a hundred books on my Kindle that I have given up on reading, because I haven't enjoyed them or I haven't agreed with them or

I've felt they're a waste of my time. So do you know what I've done with that? I've just stopped reading them, and I've moved on to something else. It has never ever occurred to me to message the author and tell them that I hate their writing – or that they're not a worthwhile human being. I just shrug my shoulders and then I move on. End of. And I don't have to do two hours of meditation and squeeze my sphincters in order to build up enough kindness to *not* message the authors. I just don't do it. Unkindness is a choice, and kindness often lies in the simple choice merely not to be unkind. It doesn't even occur to me to message the authors. Because if anything I appreciate how difficult writing is, and I have no desire to hurt them, to be unkind. I don't think I'm strange for that. I just think that's normal, or at least it should be. I experienced an entire childhood of unkindness. I have no need for more of it now in adulthood, and I have no desire to disseminate more unkindness into the world. Having been abused doesn't give me the right to abuse. Being the victim of unkindness doesn't give me the right to be unkind, and it doesn't help either. How could it? How can I heal from unkindness by being unkind myself?

I think unkindness affects us so deeply because it's part of our evolutionary survival drive. It's our back brain paying attention to threat. When someone is unkind – when they're perceived as a threat, someone who's attacking us, someone we can't trust to ally with us



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but who instead is turning on us – then our brain focuses on that. Of course it does. It should do! If you're caveman or cavewoman on the savannah, and an antelope comes into view and a leopard comes into view, you'd better hope your brain focuses on the leopard – on the negative, on the dangerous – or you might just be the leopard's lunch.

So of course our brain fixates on negativity and threat and unkindness, and struggles to remember positivity and safety and kindness. It's a survival thing. What our brains aren't so adapted to is this whole internet thing where predators have access to us, have proximity to us, via their keyboards and phones, 24 hours a day. That's why it's so stressful. Our tribe, our village, which might have been home to say 70 or 100 people, with defined borders and fences, suddenly is a global village and there's no sense of boundary. There's no safety. I can write something on my blog in Cambridgeshire and someone I've never met and never will meet from Manchester or Munich or Malaysia can attack me for it. They're not in my tribe. They don't care about my tribe. They just fire off arrows from the darkness of anonymity – it's not a fair fight. That is something that our brains haven't evolved to deal with, so no wonder it affects people's mental health so much.

I'm still learning how to deal with this. But ultimately, I think I've come to the conclusion that this isn't about social

media or the internet. This is about human nature, and unfortunately there's an awful lot of unkindness in human nature. That's why so many of us have been abused or bullied or betrayed. Kindness doesn't always come naturally to humankind.

And that's depressing, isn't it? I think, when I first started my recovery journey, that I had this utopian kind of vision that all that bad stuff was in the past – the abuse, the trauma. Gone. And here I was, moving forwards: I was safe now, and bad stuff wouldn't happen now, because bad stuff was from the past, and this was a shiny new future. I think I divided the world very simply into abusers – specifically child abusers – and nice people. I expected it to be clear-cut like that. But of course it isn't. The propensity to be unkind, to misuse our power, to lack empathy and fail to see other human beings as human beings just like us, is in all of us. Whenever we're not in the green zone, whenever we don't feel safe, especially when we go into the amber zone of the fight response because we feel under threat, our tendency is to try to keep ourselves safe by attacking others. I think that's what fuelling a lot of what goes on on in the internet. I think it's a lot of people caught up in their own sense of unsafety and trauma, feeling attacked and harassed and humiliated and shamed by the world, and so taking it out on others. One of my sayings from my **'Working with Shame'** course is that



'shamed people shame people'. I think that's so true. We don't mean to, but whenever we're triggered into shame, it's in all of us – it's certainly in me – to hit back and to pass the shame onto others.

So what I've been learning to do – frustratingly slowly like most things in my life that I'm working on – is that it doesn't help my brain to feel safe for me to focus on the unkindness in the world. All it does it set off my smoke alarm, drawing attention to the leopards or anything with spots. And so it keeps me stuck in my back brain, on alert, feeling unsafe, hypervigilant. Not only does that slow down our recovery from trauma – which is largely about getting our nervous systems to come back down into the green zone, into safety again – but it also predisposes us, ourselves, to be unkind – to lash out, to be less than our best selves. We need our front brains online to be our best selves – to be kind, to be empathic, to be caring. So when we're focused on danger, when we allow our attention to be dominated by all the unkindness around us, then actually we're risking becoming unkind ourselves.

So I'm trying more and more to focus on noticing – 'just noticing' – and focusing attention on all the kindness in the world instead. And to really notice it. To focus my *full* attention on it. To revel in it, to enjoy it, to suck all the goodness

out of it – and to really be grateful for it. It's a way of saying to my brain, 'Yes, I see the unkindness and the danger. But look at how much more kindness there is. Look at how good all the goodness is.'

As an example: last week I was away doing a couple of training and input sessions at a counselling centre in the Peak District. It's a place called Invicta Therapy and it's run by two of the most lovely ladies I have ever met in my entire life, Amanda and Bel. And genuinely, the only reason that I went there and I'm involved with the work they're doing there is because of their loveliness and their kindness. If you know them, you'll know exactly what I mean.

So they've got this building that they've totally renovated to turn it into a counselling centre, and the principles underpinning everything they've done are all about valuing their clients, respecting them, *deeply* respecting them as valuable human beings, and wanting to give them the best possible environment in which to have therapy. So what they've done with this building is truly outstanding. It's absolutely beautiful. There are all these individual counselling rooms that are light and airy and beautifully decorated, and the attention to detail in each of them is incredible. Just lovely furniture, lovely furnishings, mirrors and nik-naks and pictures and – oh my word, I can't describe it. Even the door handles are



lush. There's just such attention to detail. And when you talk to Amanda and Bel about it, what comes through so strongly is this energy, this force of kindness that is driving it all. It's them wanting to be kind to their clients. It's not about impressing them – not at all. There's nothing of ego or power or ostentation in it. It's all about this deep, humane kindness of caring deeply about the value they're placing on their clients by the quality of their surroundings. Wanting them to feel comfortable. Wanting them to feel safe. Wanting them to feel, 'I'm worth this. I'm valuable.' Wanting them to feel, 'It's okay. I can heal. I can recover. There's hope.'

And as you go in – and it's so light, and it's so so peaceful – it's like you just feel you can breathe. It's amazing. I've been to so many counselling settings over the years that are drab and dingy and brown frayed carpets and suspicious stains on the chairs, and you're stuck in a dim, window-less room like a cupboard, and the chair creaks every time you move and the floor is a bit sticky and there's a layer of grime on the windowsills. Obviously not everywhere is like that – but a lot of places are – and as the client you just fill up with this sense of, 'Yep, this is what I deserve' – your surroundings seem to reflect what you feel on the inside, your sense of value and worth. But when I stepped into Invicta, it was the exact opposite. It's like you feel your spirit lifting, your

sense of worth lifting. It's a place that you actively want to go to, to be. It's amazing. I wish every counselling centre in the country could be like Invicta!

Because everything that Amanda and Bel have done there is just so kind. It's so good. It's so honouring and valuing and truly, truly wonderful. It's had quite an impact on me – can you tell?! So anyway I was doing a couple of sessions there last week, and what really struck me was the sense of kindness that permeated the whole day. There were a couple of ladies who came to do teas and coffees, and they were just so kind. Just the way they set lunch out for me and Amanda and Bel in between the sessions. Just the way they served people. Just their joy at giving.

And it's such a contrast to the mean, nasty, poke-the-bear trolling that led to Caroline Flack's death. It's just the exact opposite. And what I'm struck by, on a continual basis, is that despite all the abuse I suffered, and actually despite the trolling I experience even now, there is always so much more kindness. But it's so easy not to see it. Because my survival brain doesn't need to. That's why I have to train my front brain to notice it, to see it, to be grateful for it.

At one point in my life, if someone had said to me, 'But look at all the kind people around you' I think I would have spat at them in disgust and offence. I'd have wanted to say, 'Kind people?'



Where? Everyone just abuses me. Everyone just hurts me.' Because that's what it felt like for a very long time. But of course it wasn't entirely true. Yes, I'd suffered a tonne of abuse. But the waitress in Chiquito – she was kind, she was gracious, she brought more mayo with a smile when I asked her for it. She didn't abuse me. She's not unkind. The neighbour who brought my bin back in to rescue it from the storm because I was away – they haven't abused me. That was just a simple act of kindness. And nowadays I see all these people – thousands of them each year – who give up their money and give up their time to come on training and do courses and read books with the sole intention of helping people recover from trauma. None of them are perfect. There may even be one or two perpetrators in amongst them. But on the whole, the vast majority are kind. They're good people. I have met far more kind people in my life than I have met abusers.

But at one point in my life I couldn't have seen any of that. My survival-based back brain was so focused on threat, and everything hurt so much with the pain of all the abuse I'd suffered, that I couldn't see kindness even if I tried. So I get that, I really do. But ultimately what's helped me bring my front brain online more and more is to train it to focus on good things. This is what gratitude rituals are about. The science is quite clear that they're effective in changing our mood and even our neurobiology, and they're

effective exactly because they're getting our front brain to balance up our back brain's natural negativity by training it to spot the positive and to focus on it.

I think the biggest shift that happened in me, ultimately, though – and this is an ongoing journey, as many things are – was when I started to be kind towards myself. Again, it's so easy – it's normal, it's natural, it has survival purpose – to focus on the negatives: to see everything that we might be doing wrong, or saying wrong, or getting wrong. It's to beat ourselves up for all our social awkwardnesses, and for being lazy, and for making mistakes. Many of us had that style of 'coaching' (as it were) modelled to us in the parenting we received. It's harsh, it's discipline-based, and it's certainly not undergirded with kindness. So it's no wonder that we perpetuated it towards ourselves.

And at some fundamental level within ourselves, it seems to make sense to beat ourselves up: surely we need to be told off if we messed up, rather than treated with kindness? Because, if the punishment isn't harsh, surely we'll do it again, won't we? That's what our criminal justice system is based on. Punish them, send them to prison, treat like they're not quite a human being, and hey presto they will leave prison transformed into model citizens. Except, of course, most of the time, it doesn't work, does it?



And it doesn't work when we punish ourselves. Unkindness doesn't lead to growth. Just as I don't become a better writer by an anonymous commenter telling me how crap my writing is, neither do any of us grow into our best selves by someone (us!) pointing out how evil we are all the time. It's this crazy irony, really, deep down: that we try to coerce ourselves, with self-abuse, into being loving, productive, kind human beings. We just hate ourselves, loathe ourselves, beat ourselves up. And then we wonder why we're stuck in the danger zone as if we're being attacked and abused all the time – because we *are* being attacked and abused all the time!

So what eventually occurred to me, after many long years of resisting this idea, was that kindness begets kindness. That actually I'll grow and develop and become a better person, and a kinder person, if I treat myself with kindness. And that, I think, is revolutionary.

It's an insanely powerful act of rebellion against the people who abused us to refuse to continue to abuse ourselves: to say, 'It stops here' and put an end to it. To refuse their way of doing life, their way of treating people, their legacy. To vigorously rebel against that through the sheer simplicity of showing kindness towards ourselves. One of the really sad things I see a lot of is survivors attacking other survivors. Victims of abuse attacking other victims of abuse.

No! We're doing the abusers' work for them! – we're picking up their baton and running with it. We've got to drop it. We've got to stop attacking and shaming and complaining about other abuse survivors, and instead allow ourselves to be filled with compassion for each other, as we should be filled with compassion for ourselves. It's to allow that sense of kindness to permeate everything we do and are.

One of the things that really surprised me after I started doing this work was that in the early days people warned me about the perpetrators – about powerful people who don't want anyone to talk about child sexual abuse – and how they would conspire against me to try to stop me. That has never, to my knowledge, happened. All of the opposition I have received to trying to help people recover from trauma has come from people who themselves have been traumatised – from survivors. 'A house divided against itself cannot stand' goes the saying. We ought to be joining together, supporting each other, being united, being kind to each other – or at the very least just leaving each other alone. The perpetrators don't need to mount attacks on us, because we do their work for them. How incredibly sad is that? We forget who the real enemy is.

To stand up to unkindness, not by attacking people who are unkind, though, but just by being kind in return



– that to me is revolutionary. There’s another old saying, ‘Those who live by the sword will die by the sword’. So how about we put our swords down?

Now that of course leads to a whole series of other questions, even a sense of panic amongst some people. What am I saying? To put up with the abuse? Just to smile sweetly? Just to be nice? No, that’s not what I’m saying at all, and I think it’s such a complex and important subject that I’m going to do a whole podcast on that, probably next episode. Kindness and boundaries go together. Kindness without boundaries inevitably leads to exploitation. So I’ll look at that in more detail in a later episode, because it’s a really important subject.

What I am saying for now is simply that our revolution can be one where we don’t fight fire with fire, and unkindness with unkindness, but one of peaceful resistance. Refusing to get drawn into unkindness. Refusing to retaliate. Refusing to fight back. And that starts, I think, at the most profound and revolutionary level, in the way that we treat ourselves. Being kind to ourselves. Self-care. A lot of talk about self-care seems to suggest that it’s all about scented candles and bath bombs. That just doesn’t cut it for me. Self-care for me is much more potent and world-changing than that. It’s much more edgy and rebellious and ‘up yours’. Self-care is the way that we draw a line in the sand and say, ‘No more. No

more unkindness. Abuse is wrong, and I refuse to participate in it.’ That’s not easy to do – it goes against everything that very often we’ve grown to believe is normal. But boy is it powerful! When we say, ‘I refuse to continue the abuser’s work, to do it for them, even in their absence. I refuse to allow their extreme unkindness to influence who I am. I am going to be kind – even to myself.’

For me, there was this moment, which I’ve talked about elsewhere, where I realised that the shame gremlins were telling me that I’m not a good person, I’m not a kind person, I’m not a loving person, I’m not a compassionate person. It was one of the most persistent messages of the many shame gremlins that have accompanied me all my life. The ‘unkind’ shame gremlin would sit on my shoulder and shame me for all my unkindness towards myself. ‘You’re an abuser,’ it would say to me, and at one level it was right. But on my other shoulder sat the shame gremlin that told me that I didn’t deserve kindness. So I was trying to keep that one happy too. Because if I tried anything that smacked of self-care, that gremlin would say to me, ‘Ugh! You don’t deserve nice things. You need to work hard, give more, sacrifice yourself. You can’t have self-care!’

But ultimately, what it came down to, in this epic battle that went on within myself over several years, was a decision that I wanted to be kind. ▶▶



That's who I wanted to be as a person. I fail. Continually I fail! I react out of shame or hurt or frustration or just plain tiredness a hundred times a week and I fail to be kind. But I'm kind enough to myself now to forgive myself for failing to be kind. For failing at all. Kindness is king. If we can be kind to ourselves, it opens up infinite possibilities. It stops us beating ourselves up for everything. And if we stop beating ourselves up, if we stop fearing being beaten up, then suddenly we can risk living. We can risk relationships. We can risk pursuing our dreams. We can risk risking.

Kindness is a superpower that gives us the freedom to fail, because we're not going to pounce on ourselves just for trying. Kindness says, 'You were doing the best you could.' Kindness shrugs its shoulders and says, 'Good effort. Try again.' Kindness doesn't judge us. Kindness puts an arm around us and

encourages us to keep going. And that's what we need. We don't need keyboard warriors pointing out all our inadequacies and shaming us for our imperfections. We need kindness kings who will give us the benefit of the doubt, who'll treat us with dignity and respect, who'll honour our efforts, who will see the good in us. Can you imagine how different life would be if we were kind like that towards ourselves and others, and if every time we went on social media, that's all we saw? What a thought!

So that's all we have time for in this episode. Thank you for joining me. You can subscribe on Apple Podcasts, on Spotify, or you can listen direct from my website at carolynspring.com/podcasts.

I hope that helps, at least a little and speak soon!

