

KINDNESS: THE WIN-WIN SUPERPOWER – JAMIL ZAKI, PH.D. & LEON LOGOTHETIS – #888

Dave Asprey:

You're listening to the Human Upgrade with Dave Asprey, formerly Bulletproof Radio.

Dave:

Today's guest on the show is a professor of psychology at Stanford University and director of the Stanford Neuroscience Lab. And he's looked at what empathy and kindness do to humans on all sorts of different levels and wrote a fascinating and engaging book called *The War For Kindness*. So I wanted to have a professor Jamil Zaki on the show. This is the time when you can hack your response to the environment so that you are naturally kind and it doesn't take effort, that it's just built in and there's experiments. There's all kinds of cool stuff we're going to talk about. So Jamil, welcome to the show.

Jamil Zaki:

It's a pleasure to be here.

Dave:

So what is it about kindness that's special or different. What made it worthy of your career pursuit?

Jamil Zaki:

I think it's, among human beings, I don't know, top three capacities that have allowed us to thrive as a species. Our secret comes in so many forms. We can plan really well, we can remember well, but really, if you look at us 100,000 years ago, we were a pretty unimpressive animal. Medium-sized mammal, not particularly fast or strong. We couldn't fly or swim very well, but in part, our ability to work together is what allowed us to succeed. Because even if, as individuals, we were unimpressive, as a collective we are like a super organism that can do things, no other animal ever could. So I really think that even now there's all sorts of evidence that kindness is our superpower. It's a superpower hidden and plain sight in a way.

Dave:

Today's guest has only three small words that back up what he does and they are, go be kind. I'm talking about Leon Logothetis, who's a world renowned, motivational speaker, adventure and philanthropist, who is known everywhere as the kindness guy. By the way he's also the happiness guy on Instagram. And he wrote *happiness is the new rich, inner peace is the new success, health is the new wealth, kindness is the new cool*. Leon, welcome to the show.

Leon Logothetis:

Thank you very much for having me.

Dave:

All right. Kindness is such a mushy word. Like we all sort of know what kindness is when we see it, but it's relatively hard to define. How do you define kindness?

Leon:

Do you know, a lot of people always come up to me and they say, you are the kindness guy. You tell me what kindness means. And they expect to have this epic answer that solves all world problems. But the truth is that for me, kindness is simply helping someone feel less alone. That's it.

Dave:

Wow. That's a great definition.

Leon:

Yeah. When you make someone feel like they matter, when you see someone, when you take someone's loneliness, depression and transform it by simply being kind, that's quite a profound way to be.

Jamil Zaki:

Yeah. So kindness is also known as pro-social behavior or pro-sociality in psychology and economics and it's any behavior that benefits someone else. Now let's cut kindness into two parts, one cooperation. That's where I benefit you and, and me at the same time. That's when we work together to accomplish something that neither of us could do alone. Now, the other type of kindness would be altruism. That's where I do something for you and I don't benefit, and maybe I'm even worse off for doing it.

The other type of kindness would be altruism. That's where I do something for you and I don't benefit. And maybe I'm even worse off for doing it. So the classic example of that would be someone in the military, throwing themselves on a grenade to protect the rest of their platoon. Obviously they're sacrificing everything in order to act kindly towards others. Now for, I don't know, centuries millennia, people have been trying to divide altruism from cooperation by saying, is there an act that we can find that is truly altruistic? And the answer is, it's really difficult and it depends on how you define it because sometimes I might act kindly towards you and it's obviously for a self-interested reason or a cooperative reason. You benefit, but I get a tax break, you benefit, but I impress somebody who I'm hoping to date or you benefit, but then you pay me back.

You feel like you owe me something later on. Now, maybe I can say, "Well, what if I donate to charity anonymously?" Maybe that's an act of true altruism because where's the benefit. But it turns out, and this is some research that I and lots of other people have done, that when you give to others, you actually experience pleasure. Like we found using functional magnetic resonance imaging, that when you donate money to someone else, you activate similar parts of your brain as when you eat chocolate. So if we enjoy kindness, does that make it selfish? These are the types of questions that people have been asking for a long time. And I think we should stop asking because to me, even if the way that we're built biologically means that we enjoy kindness, to me that doesn't take away from how powerful it is that we are kind. I think it makes it more powerful and more beautiful that we've evolved to enjoy it.

Leon:

A wise man once said to me that, "People never remember what you say to them, but they always remember how you make them feel." So the way to make someone kinder is to show them that kindness is a win-win. To show them the benefits of coming from a place of love and coming from a place of compassion and empathy. And sometimes people always say to me, they're like, "I can't be kind because it's weakness. If I'm kind, then they'll squash me." And I tell them the story of Muhammad Ali and Muhammad Ali, not a perfect man, but no one is, is a man that came from his heart.

Is a man that came from a place of service, is a man that came from love. And then I say to them, "Would you mess with Muhammad Ali?" And they're like, "No, of course not." And the point is that you can be kind and you can be strong. Your kindness doesn't mean you can let people walk all over you. Absolutely not. There's a boundary in place, it's not okay to treat me like that. Treat people with respect, but there's a boundary that you put up, do not mess with me, but I'm going to be kind.

Dave:

So kindness isn't weakness, but kindness can feel like weakness, especially in the face of someone who isn't being kind towards you. What's the process that you coach people to go through to just be kind.

Leon:

Many of us make commitments. One of the commitments is to our work. Another of the commitments is to our families. How many of us make a commitment of how we're going to show up in the world, so that's the secret source let's say. That's what I do every day, I'm not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but I've made a commitment to show up with compassion and kindness as often as I possibly can. And by doing that through osmosis to a certain degree, I really don't spend that much time around people who aren't kind, who don't come from their hearts.

It took time and it doesn't always work. You never know what happens in life, but if you do that and you make a commitment, the greatest thing that one can do is have an intention. And that intention of showing up with a kind soul, with a kind heart with some compassion is something that will truly change lives. And that's my trick, that's what I do. That's what I do as often as I possibly can. And it's easy to do it if you win the lottery, right? It's easy to do it if everything's going well, the hard part is to do it when things are not going well. When someone upsets you on the road, when you want to get angry. But if you make that commitment like you do with your family, like you do with your work, lives change, starting with your own.

Dave:

How do you as a researcher define kindness versus empathy versus compassion. And then I want you to tell me how to raise all three of them.

Jamil Zaki:

Thank you. I think it's really important to get clarity because these can feel like such soft and fuzzy terms, but they're not. I mean, at least from a research perspective, we can measure them. And so, as I said earlier, kindness is a behavior that benefits another person. It's anything that I do that leaves you better off than you were before. And then empathy is an experience. It's the experience of connecting with someone emotionally. Now the way that researchers think about empathy is as an umbrella term, that actually contains multiple ways we relate to each other.

So I'll give you an example, let's say that you're having lunch with a friend, back when we could do that and he gets a phone call and you don't know who's on the other side or what they're saying, but he starts to cry and it's not happy tears. So a bunch of things might happen in you first, you might feel really crappy yourself. You might start to feel sad. You might even feel yourself start to tear up. That would be emotional empathy or emotion contagion. When you catch vicariously, what someone else is feeling, then you might try to think about what he's feeling and why, was he expecting some news or something.

That's what we'd call cognitive empathy, trying to piece together, what's going on in someone else's experience. And then third, you might want to help him. You might feel an urge or desire for his

wellbeing to improve, that's what we would call empathic concern. But, and here's a key point it's interchangeable with compassion. So the way that scientists often see it is that empathy is like a big umbrella term and then compassion would be one of the components of our emotional connectedness to others. Does that make sense?

Dave:

It does make sense. All right, actually, before you even tell us how we're going to raise those in ourselves stack rank them most important to least important.

Jamil Zaki:

The NBA draft of social behavior and experience. Number one to the Cleveland cavalier is... I think that it depends, so kindness is obviously I think the most important for us as a collective. We need to cooperate, we need to work together. And that's whether you're in a family or a company or a culture.

Dave:

Okay, you can be kind, even if you don't feel any empathy and you think everyone's a jerk.

Jamil Zaki:

You can but when it comes to your personal health, probably a combination of kindness and compassion matter a lot.

Dave:

It's very expensive to be full of hate and act kind. You get tired doing that. I would imagine anyway so, okay.

Jamil Zaki:

We ran a study with Stanford students where we asked them how many kind acts they had engaged in that day. And we asked them how much empathy they had felt that day and compassion. And what we found was that when people acted kindly, they generally felt better and they felt less stressed, they felt less lonely and so forth. But That was especially true, if they had felt compassion for the person to whom they had acted kindly. And kindness in the absence of compassion, didn't seem to help very much.

So behind both of those in my priority list would be other forms of empathy, especially I think it's important to understand other people, but sharing other people's pain, although sometimes like a kickstart for kindness and compassion, can also be really dangerous. It can burn us out, it can overwhelm us really quickly and it can make us want to avoid social contact instead of engaging. Imagine walking down a block in Midtown Manhattan and feeling the pain of everyone you saw, you'd like collapse in a minute. And so I don't know that that type of empathy is very sustainable.

Dave:

How do you know when too much kindness happens?

Leon:

Well, remember my definition and my definition is kindness is simply helping someone feel less alone. So if that's true, it's true for me, maybe not true for you, but it's true for me. If that's the case, then you don't need to be a monk to make someone feel less alone, you just need to be present for them.

You don't need to be a monk to make someone feel less alone. You just need to be present for them. You just need to make them feel like they matter. You just need to show up. It doesn't mean you can't do silly things like this weekend, I probably shouldn't share this, but I'm going to, I'd always wanted to have a bath in glitter, so I did. Now, I don't know any monks that have had baths in glitter. But just being kind doesn't mean you have to give up everything. You can't be silly, you can't go on adventures, you can't have bad days. You can. It's all good. Have a bad day.

It's all good. Except when you have a bad day or a bad week or a bad month, when you're on the floor and you feel down, that's okay. But as the great man, Winston Churchill once said, never, never, never give up. So you're down. You're on the floor. It's okay. You've been mean it's okay. When you're ready, stand up and keep on going.

Dave:

All right. So it's the continued practice of kindness, not the perfection of kindness that you're targeting.

Leon:

Absolutely. It's the same thing with love. Let's say, like with love, people think, and I used to be one of those people that you fall in love and everything's going to work itself out. It's all going to work itself out, but the truth is you have to commit to it. You have to commit to how you show up on a daily basis. The same thing with kindness, you have to commit to it. That's the way it is.

Dave:

Okay. That makes a lot of sense. And so it's a practice much like meditation, but instead of saying, I have a daily meditation practice, you're saying I have a daily kindness practice and you walk through life saying, "All right, how do I help the people around me not feel alone?"

Leon:

Yes, and sometimes people say to me, "Why are you so kind, why did you decide to live your life like this?" And the truth is, as a kid, I felt profoundly alone. I know what it feels like to feel like one doesn't matter. I know what it feels like to feel ostracized. I know. And you're human being and your listeners are human beings and they know too. So the way to resolve that in many instances is to have someone be kind to you. And when someone is kind to you, things get better. So you take that kindness and you throw it like it's confetti to others and it becomes a win-win. I win because I'm being kind to you and I feel better. You win because my kindness makes you feel like you matter.

Dave:

Why would someone reject empathy? What, what leads to that?

Jamil Zaki:

Well, you talked about, in the Manhattan example, rejecting empathy, and I think it's not always a bad choice. I do think that again, if you're in this situation where empathy will overwhelm you, where it will actually interfere with you doing what you need to do, for instance, then you probably need to shut it off. A linebacker who empathizes with the running back will be really bad at doing their job at tackling.

And a soldier would be even worse or a surgeon, a surgeon who feels the pain of a patient can't help that person. So I think it's adaptive and to the good overall that we have control over our emotional experiences, which we do as I'm sure you know, so we control all sorts of emotions. We can turn empathy up or down like the volume knob on a stereo. And that's a good capacity to have. The problem is when we make mistakes with that capacity, when we decide that we shouldn't empathize because we think it would be better to focus on ourselves and we're dead wrong and it actually hurts us.

Dave:

Okay. How do we know? We're sitting at home binge watching Netflix, hopefully listen to a few podcasts here and there. And are you doing this? Are you not doing this? What's our method of awareness for this?

Jamil Zaki:

Of how empathic we're being- [crosstalk 00:18:28].

Dave:

Whether we're turning it off or not. I don't think most soldiers go, "Today I'm going to turn off empathy and go win the war." It's not like that. It seems like it's mostly unconscious. I don't go, "Well, I'm in New York today so I'm going to put on my energy condom." It's like if you're in a bright sunshine, you squint to help block out some of the light. And it seems like it's mostly automated whether or not we block out empathy, but you're actually saying you can choose to reject empathy, but you can also choose to take more of it in. So how do you know if you're rejecting it when you're not paying attention?

Jamil Zaki:

Well, I think a lot of our mental lives are on autopilot in lots of ways most of the time. And that's a good thing, because we couldn't be tuning all of our knobs all the time and also walk and chew gum, we'd fall over. So it's good that we're on autopilot a lot of the time in a lot of ways. But I do think that there's a way to kick off autopilot and interrogate, become curious about what's happening inside ourselves. So I think you aptly described a situation where if I'm hypoglycemic, if I'm stressed, if I'm sleep deprived, I'm going to have certain thoughts about people and I'm going to act certain ways that if I don't think about it, I won't realize I'm being unempathic right now.

But if you step out and sort of try to see an interaction you're having as a fly on the wall, for instance, I bet that it would be pretty easy to pick out when you've acted in a way that was unempathic or when you've had thoughts that are incurious about other people. One thing that I try to do, and this is not me as a scientist, it's just me as a person, is if I'm having a conversation, I ask myself what someone said that surprised me or that I learned from. Because I think a lot of the time in conversations, we actually are so focused on our own story that we have already decided is right before we have a conversation that we don't actually empathize or listen much at all. And if we are listening, one sign is that we learn something or we're surprised.

Dave:

Do you run through some sort of a calculus when you're saying, "All right, I'm in my VW beetle and me are driving from one continent to another." And you're saying, "I'm going to do this thing, and it's kind for party A, but it's maybe ignoring or not kind to party B." Do you have like a kindness equation that runs through your head?

Leon:

The equation that runs through my heart...

Dave:

Okay, well said.

Leon:

is does it feel right? Does it feel right? If it feels right, I will do it. Have I made mistakes? Yes. But more often than not, I follow my heart and the heart always wins. Except when it doesn't, but that's rarely.

Dave:

Now what, what fascinates me is, I love that you're just going with your intuition, the body tells you. In the world of neuroscience where I spend some of my time at one of my companies, you can see the body knows what's right, the body knows stuff the mind doesn't know and then the mind oftentimes changes the signal that comes from the body. Do you feel like people become kindness junkies where they just can't stop talking about, "Oh my God, you have to be kind. I'm the kindest person, kind, kind, kind." And it sort of takes over their life. Is that a thing?

Leon:

It is 100% a thing. I never wanted to preach. I never wanted to sit on a stage and tell you, "This is what you have to do. You have to be kind, or you have to do this and if you don't do it, then you're screwed." Because if you do that, you become a fundamentalist. You may not be a fundamentalist in the narrow sense of the word, but you are a fundamentalist. You are a kindness fundamentalist. Some people don't want to hear what you have to say. That's the reality. Don't ram it down their throats. I once said to someone, "You can be blinded by the light." And there are kindness warriors out there that are fundamentalists. And I don't want to be told what to do by anyone, let alone a fundamentalist.

Dave:

Well said. In fact that's a meme worthy quote right there. Where does gratitude fit in, in your framework? Because you're talking about those kindness versus empathy versus compassion. How do you integrate it or do you integrate gratitude into that?

Jamil Zaki:

I think of gratitude as a separate phenomenon apart from these things, but that doesn't mean it's unconnected to them. So for instance, we've talked about empathy and kindness from the givers side, but one of the biggest sources of gratitude is the kindness of others. When someone acts kindly towards us, when they empathize with us, we often feel gratitude for our connection, with them, gratitude for their good will, gratitude for their help.

I teach a class at Stanford called becoming kinder, which is about not just the science of empathy and kindness, but it has a lot of challenges that students do every weekend, exercises to get them to try to stretch their kindness and empathy. And one of them pertains to gratitude, which is, I ask students to notice somebody else's kindness and reinforce it. And it doesn't have to be kindness to you. Like notice someone being kind to somebody else and thank them for that behavior.

And it's hugely powerful for students because, I think that a lot of us, because we're so stressed and busy and overwhelmed, and now anxious from the situation that we're all in together, we have

blindness on sometimes for the interconnectedness of people. And when you focus on looking for kindness, guess what you find it, you find it in enormous and vast quantities.

And finding it and realizing not just this one person was kind to this one other person, but awakening to the kindness, that's all around us, first of all, can influence your behavior and make you more likely to be kind, but second, I think instills a deep gratitude about the nature of humanity, that we're not all bad, that we do have a lot of powerful compassion in us. And I think that that's one tremendous source of gratitude for me.

Dave:

Leon, give me some details on Cell Phone Roulette.

Leon:

I wrote a book, my latest book is called, Go Be Kind and it's 28 and a half adventures guaranteed to make you happier. And, and basically what it is, is people would come up to me and they'd be like, "I can't quit my job. I can't give random people life changing gifts. I'm not going to be kind." And I'm like, "Okay." So what I did was created this book, which enabled you to go on the same kind of adventure that I went on without spending a single penny, because it's not about getting a yellow motorbike.

It's not about a yellow VW beetle. It's about how you show up moment to moment. That's all. So the Cell Phone Roulette is one of the adventures in the book. You take your phone out, you go down your contacts without knowing where you're going and wherever it lands, wherever it lands, you call them or you text them and you say something that will make that person feel less alone.

And I did a little video doing that. And I was like, "Oh my God, it's much easier when you write it than when you actually do it." And I got this guy and I called him. I literally had no idea who he was. Because I have people on my phone, sometimes I don't know who they are. And I called him and we did the cell phone roulette and I was kind to him and he remembered me and then I remembered him. And it was a beautiful thing. So that's really what cell phone roulette. It's one of the 28 and a half adventures in the book, it's really a journal.

Dave:

You've actually given a TED Talk on hacking empathy and I'm a big fan of your systems to do things like that because systems make things easy. And you wrote a whole chapter in the War For Kindness on something called kind systems. So what is a kind system?

Jamil Zaki:

We think of my psychology, whether it's our personality or our kindness and empathy or whatever it is, just something that's inside us, the individual. But as we've been talking about humanity is a herd species. We're the most groupy animal that, that exists. We conform to the norms and structures around us. So I might want to be kind, but if everyone around me is being an asshole, I'll decide that in order to fall in line, I need to act that way too. And likewise, I might feel like being unkind, but if the people around me are emphasizing how important it is to be kind,

I'll fall in line with that as well. And so it turns out that there's all sorts of evidence that one of the most powerful ways to change someone's behavior is to change what they notice about other people. So when people are exposed to, or notice other people acting kindly, they are more inspired to do that themselves. And I, I think that that's so important for anybody in a leadership position, in any

type of structure. Since the book came out, I've talked with leaders in hospital systems, school systems, prison systems, businesses, and other organizations.

And sometimes they ask me, "Is there a pill that I can give my team members to make them more empathic?" And I'm like, "No, you are the pill. You are the only pill because by setting an example, by incentivizing highlighting and amplifying kind behaviors, you make them stickier. You make them more magnetic. You make them more likely to ripple outwards through a culture." And so I tell leaders to make, and people in general, that they should make empathy and kindness loud in order to make it forceful.

Leon:

Do you know what I've realized I came here to do, this may sound a little silly but maybe not, I came here to love. And, and not in a preachy way, not in an I'm perfect way, because trust me if I gave you the telephone numbers of all my ex-girlfriends that tell you how imperfect I am. But I came here to love and yeah, I make mistakes. I mess things up. Get it, done, clear. But that's why I came here.

Dave:

Leon, it's been a pleasure interviewing you. The easiest way to connect with you and find all of your good stuff, because you've gotten your multiple TV series and books and all that stuff, it's Instagram, thekindnessguy, I have that right?

Leon:

Yeah, thekindnessguy on Instagram.

Dave:

Thanks for your work. Thanks for being kind and thanks for showing people how they can do it and making it a practice rather than a set of perfection. I think there's some profound wisdom in what you're doing and I appreciate it.

Jamil Zaki:

Thank you very much for having me on today. You said earlier that a lot of us still live in those interconnected communities, but it's actually less and less. So in 1951, one third of humanity was urban and by 2050, at least, this was true a year ago, two thirds of humanity will be urban. So we're rapidly moving into these massive metropoli where we see a lot of people and don't know any of them and we're living alone way more than at any time in human history as well.

So I think a lot of us have talked endlessly about the disintegration of those communities as we move to a system that's just about, again, this ultra-efficient, but depersonalized market, that is all about the poorly defined nugget that you can get at will. We've been building a culture for those nuggets and for those nugget delivery systems and maybe that culture won't survive, whatever is coming next, but maybe it wasn't that natural or healthy to begin with. And one wonders whether some of what we'll lose might have been harming us all along. I don't want a silver lining what is really a lot of pain for a lot of people, but I do think that even from trauma, we can learn and grow if, if we pay attention in the right ways.

Dave:

Very, very well said. And thank you for being on and for paying attention to kindness, your book title is fantastic. War For Kindness is very memorable, that's your website to you, War For Kindness. So if you're at home right now and you're listening to this thinking, all right, kindness probably has a role maybe I'm feeling a little bit lonely, turning up empathy with the specific set of tools and instructions that are in the book is a very valuable use of your time.

It's different than meditation, although there are overlaps and there's some relatedness there, it's different than exercise, different than eating well. And it's part of not staying sane, which is a terribly low goal. Almost as low as we're going to flatten the curve, instead of we're going to eliminate the curve or lower the curve, which ought to be our real goal. And how do I not stress about doing too much to be better, but this is one of those things that has a very, very high ROI for you.

So hack your empathy, read the book and just pay attention to all the good stuff people are doing even in the midst of all the political maneuverings and fear mongering and all the other stuff like that. If you enjoyed today's episode, you know what to do, do something kind. In fact, you know an easy thing you can do that's really kind, if you've read my books or you like this show leave a review. Reviews are incredible acts of kindness for two different people. One is the creator, the person who wrote the book or did the show, the other one is for other people who might find the show.

So if you love the show and you say, "This is five stars, best ever." That's awesome, you're helping people find it. And if you think it was a bad show, I guarantee you that the creator wants to know it was a bad show and you would want to help people steer clear so you're helping tons of people when you do that. Leave reviews, thank you.