

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: SEEING KINDNESS – USING IMAGES OF CARING TO FOSTER COMPASSION IN HEALTHCARE

INTRODUCTION

Stress impacts everyone in healthcare, eroding compassion, straining relationships, and contributing to burnout and error. Yet research shows that simply seeing acts of kindness can reduce stress, promote calm, and foster a sense of shared humanity. In this webinar, Dr. David Fryburg, co-founder and president of Envision Kindness, discussed how kindness media—carefully curated images and videos of caring and connection—can rapidly reduce stress and foster compassion across healthcare settings.

THE PROBLEM: STRESS IN HEALTHCARE

- Approximately 65% of healthcare workers experience significant stress, contributing to burnout, incivility, and even violence.
- Stress impairs clinical decision-making, empathy, teamwork, and patient outcomes. It increases medical errors and worsens everyone’s care experience.
- Healthcare ranks among the nation’s most violent industries, with documented costs exceeding \$18 billion annually.
- Stress creates a vicious cycle affecting both patients and clinicians, reducing trust, engagement, and care quality. Stress is the starting point for patient and clinician incivility, aggressiveness, and violence.

THE SOLUTION: KINDNESS MEDIA

Dr. Fryburg presented evidence that viewing carefully selected images of kindness and human connection can rapidly produce measurable benefits in healthcare:

- **Emotional effects:** Increases happiness, calm, gratitude, and optimism, and decreases anxiety, irritation, and stress
- **Behavioral changes:** Makes people kinder, more generous, and more likely to volunteer
- **Perspective shift:** Improves patient satisfaction scores across multiple dimensions

WHY IT WORKS

The mechanism is grounded in evolutionary psychology and neuroscience:

- Humans are naturally wired for cooperation and caring
- Kindness media activates these innate drives passively and subconsciously within minutes
- No training or cognitive effort required; the effects are similar to meditation
- Effects can potentially last from hours to weeks

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REAL-WORLD EVIDENCE

- **Pediatric dentistry study:** Kindness media viewers (parents and staff) were markedly more inspired, happier, calmer, and donated to charity more frequently than those watching commercial television
- **Emergency department study:** Patients exposed to kindness media showed significantly greater satisfaction across all care quality measures. For example, patients rated “courtesy of the nurses” or “courtesy of the doctors” up to 33 percentage points (top box scores) higher.
- **Hospital staff study:** Clinical staff viewing kindness media reported less stress, greater civility, and improved respect

FINANCIAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL BENEFITS

- **Avoiding losses:** By reducing stress in the majority of viewers, the work has significant implications for reducing costs associated with burnout, incivility, violence, diagnostic errors, and malpractice claims
- **Creating gains:** Improved patient satisfaction and lower stress has implications for organizational reputation, staff morale, and community trust, particularly among consumers who value compassionate, pro-social organizations
- **Estimated return on investment:** Potentially millions per hospital annually, which is a significant fraction of operating margins

ADDRESSING CONCERNS: WHY SOME MAY DISCOUNT THE IMPORTANCE OF KINDNESS AND COMPASSION

Potential Concern	What We Know
Kindness is a non-billable procedure	Kindness is how care is delivered, so it may not be assumed as high a priority as the specific procedure or activity. Yet kindness and compassion are intrinsic to quality. It is woven into patient satisfaction and engagement, as well as how clinicians take pride in their care.
Lack of hard and specific science	There is extensive data on vagal nerve activation, oxytocin release, blood pressure lowering, and endorphin release.



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Potential Concern	What We Know
Difficulty scaling culture change	Media makes it possible to scale and initiate virtuous ripples.
Perception of “softness”	Kindness requires strength, courage, and willingness to address difficult issues.

BROADER VISION

Beyond immediate healthcare applications, Dr. Fryburg envisions:

- Community-level interventions fostering kindness and connection
- Rebalancing individuals’ “visual diet” against stress-inducing media
- Strengthening mental and physical health while reducing isolation and bias
- Building compassionate organizations that attract staff, patients, and support

CONCLUSION

Seeing kindness through curated media is a simple, scalable, evidence-based intervention that harnesses human nature to reduce stress, foster connection, and improve care quality, without requiring training, behavioral mandates, or moral arguments. By creating daily reminders of our capacity for caring, healthcare organizations can break the cycle of stress-induced dysfunction and build cultures where compassion thrives naturally.