IDEAS

Resist the Snark and Be Happy

Being courteous can be challenging in these times of online snark, but it is guaranteed to make you happier.

By Arthur C. Brooks

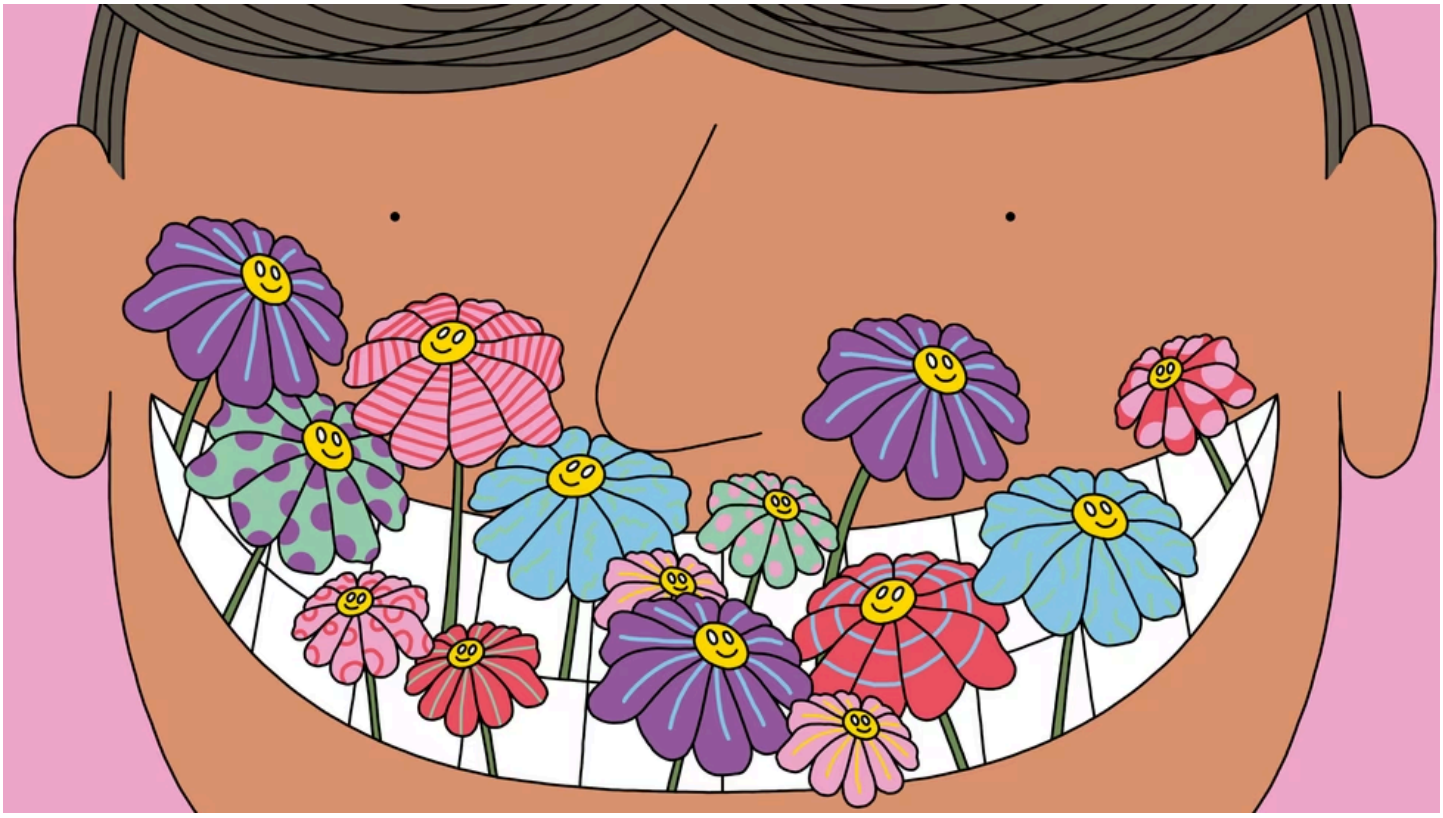

Illustration by Jan Buchczik

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"A DYING CULTURE invariably exhibits personal rudeness," wrote Robert Heinlein in his 1982 futuristic novel, *Friday*. "A loss of politeness, of gentle manners, is more significant than is a riot." What, 40 years ago, were the science-fiction adventures of a technologically enhanced "artificial person" turned out also to be prophecy when we consider today's digital networks of anonymous humans and bots, conversations between people and humanlike artificial intelligence, and a cratering of courtesy. This loss of gentle manners at almost every level is attributable, at least in part, to our adoption of these technologies.

Virtually everyone agrees that people are becoming ruder, especially online. But do you see this tendency in yourself as well? Even if you're not a sociopathic troll who feeds on incivility and conflict, you might all the same have noticed that you're less polite than you once were, and that online environments have contributed to this. You may have observed the passing of such small niceties as addressing others by name in your messages and signing off with your own name. Quite possibly, you find yourself adopting a harsher, more sarcastic tone on social media than you ever would in real life. And why bother saying "please" and "thank you" when communicating with what is, or might be, an AI bot?

This coarsening, even toward nonhuman entities, is not harmless. Indeed, it is probably hurting *your* well-being. When you become less polite, the alteration in your conduct can make you less happy, more depressed, and angrier about life. You may not be able to fix the broader trends in society, but you can—and should—fix this in yourself.

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Politeness can be defined in four ways. The first two are: *etiquette*, which governs basic manners and speech, and *conduct*, which involves actions such as holding open a door for someone to pass. The other two are a pair: *positive* politeness, which refers to doing courteous things for others, and *negative* politeness, which involves refraining from discourtesy. Social scientists define these forms of politeness not just as a set of behaviors but as part of personality. Specifically, one of the Big Five Personality Traits—agreeableness—is made up of compassion and politeness. One well-regarded study from the 1990s estimated that the heritability of agreeableness is about 41 percent genetic, allowing us to infer that you inherit some politeness from your parents partly through your genes, but more through how you were brought up. This also implies that you can become more polite with good influences and by cultivating positive habits.

Some aspects of courtesy are fairly universal, such as saying *please* and *thank you*, as well as listening while others speak (positive politeness) without interrupting (negative politeness). Other courteous values vary around the world: Shaking hands is good manners in London but not in Bangkok; tipping a taxi driver is a common courtesy in New York but not in Tokyo. Some demographic variation in politeness also occurs, and gender norms can play a part too. For example, experiments show that American women generally receive more politeness than men do, and show less courteous behavior to men than vice versa.

None of us wants to be treated rudely, online or in person. The finding in studies that when someone is discourteous toward you they lower your well-being is so commonsense as to make citation scarcely necessary. Even witnessing rudeness toward others can lower your happiness, as experiments have shown: When media content contains sarcasm by the author and the comment sections are uncivil, readers become unhappier—even if they agree with the snarky writer or commenters. Rudeness just brings you down.

More surprising, perhaps, is the effect that *your* being courteous toward others has on your own mood. Researchers in 2021 showed that being polite to others raises happiness and lowers anger. This might be counterintuitive at first, because we may at times feel a powerful urge to be sni[illegible] that mean that snapping at someone should make us feel bette[illegible] the case: Being impolite is more

like scratching at your poison-ivy rash. Giving in to the urge makes things worse. I doubt you've ever felt great when you've known, deep down, that you've been a jerk, whereas you've almost certainly felt better when you've been your better angel. Being prosocial, even when you don't feel like it or the object of your courtesy doesn't deserve it, has been proven to raise your mood.

The effect is so powerful that you benefit from being polite even when your courtesy is extended toward nonhumans. Psychologists writing in *The Journal of Positive Psychology* set research participants a task to perform alongside a helping robot named Tako: Those who had a stronger urge to thank Tako for its help afterward were more likely than others to behave in a prosocial way in a subsequent task. This finding suggests that even being civil to an AI bot or other nonhuman interface matters; yelling at Siri or being curt with ChatGPT will lead you to behave worse with other people, and lower your well-being.

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In short, be polite for your *own* sake. And be aware that if tech-mediated interactions are making you less polite, that can still hurt *your* happiness. Quitting the internet or returning to a world without AI is impractical, so the solution to this challenge of courtesy lies in how you consciously decide to behave. Here are three rules for your conduct that I can suggest.

1. Make courtesy a habit, even when other humans are not involved.
My late father had impeccable manners, and I have no doubt that if he were still alive, he would start every request to AI with *please* and finish it with *thank you*. Years ago, I would have made fun of that—*Dad, the bot doesn't care!*—but I'm sure he wouldn't have paid any attention, because I now understand that his good manners were a demonstration of decent behavior *to* himself, *about* himself. And they would have protected him from some of the unhappiness we see all around. So today, I try to imitate him, online and in person, whomever or whatever I'm interacting with.

2. Renounce snark, whether you're witnessing it or using it yourself.
As noted, media sarcasm can lower [redacted] as its consumer. Yet mockery of others seems an integral part of mo[redacted]ation, especially among people who wish to seem sophisticated. I try not to participate in this, because even if, in the

moment, it can feel satisfying or make me laugh, I know the cost to my soul. I no longer read comment sections in publications, and when an author throws out an impolite barb, I stop reading altogether.

3. Respond to rudeness not with rudeness, but with courtesy.
If your happiness correspondent got into social-media spats or angry public battles, that would be a bad look and very off-brand. So I always refrain. But I try to go further than self-restraint: If I need to react to a rude in-person remark or mean online comment, I try to see it as an opportunity to improve my well-being by responding with courtesy and dignity. This gets easier with practice, and I have never once been sorry for passing on the opportunity to retaliate with a nasty zinger. I'm only sorry when I fail to make use of the opportunity to do the right thing and feel good about it.

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One last thought about Heinlein's "dying culture" claim: Is it true that our culture is dying, given all the rudeness? And if so, are we too far gone to turn it around? On many days, things do look bleak, as online nastiness seems to become the dominant style. But my personal defense mechanism also aims to act as a countercultural force: I see politeness as today's punk rock because it so transgresses the spirit of our times. And like punk rock, when you empower yourself with politeness, you feel exhilarated. It is the ultimate exercise in freedom: the freedom to be the person I want to be in the face of a cultural tyranny.

Thank you for reading this column.

Want to learn more about leading a life that feels full and meaningful? Join Arthur C. Brooks and The Atlantic's editor in chief, Jeffrey Goldberg, on Monday, August 11, at 2:30 p.m. ET as they discuss Brooks's new book, The Happiness Files: Insights on Work and Life. *Learn more about the event here.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Arthur C. Brooks

Arthur C. Brooks is a contributing writer at *The Atlantic* and the host of the *How to Build a Happy Life* podcast. To receive his weekly column "How to Build a Life" in your inbox, sign up here.

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