



Mental Health
Foundation

Mental Health
Awareness Week

18 - 24
May 2020

Research Briefing



What do we mean by kindness?

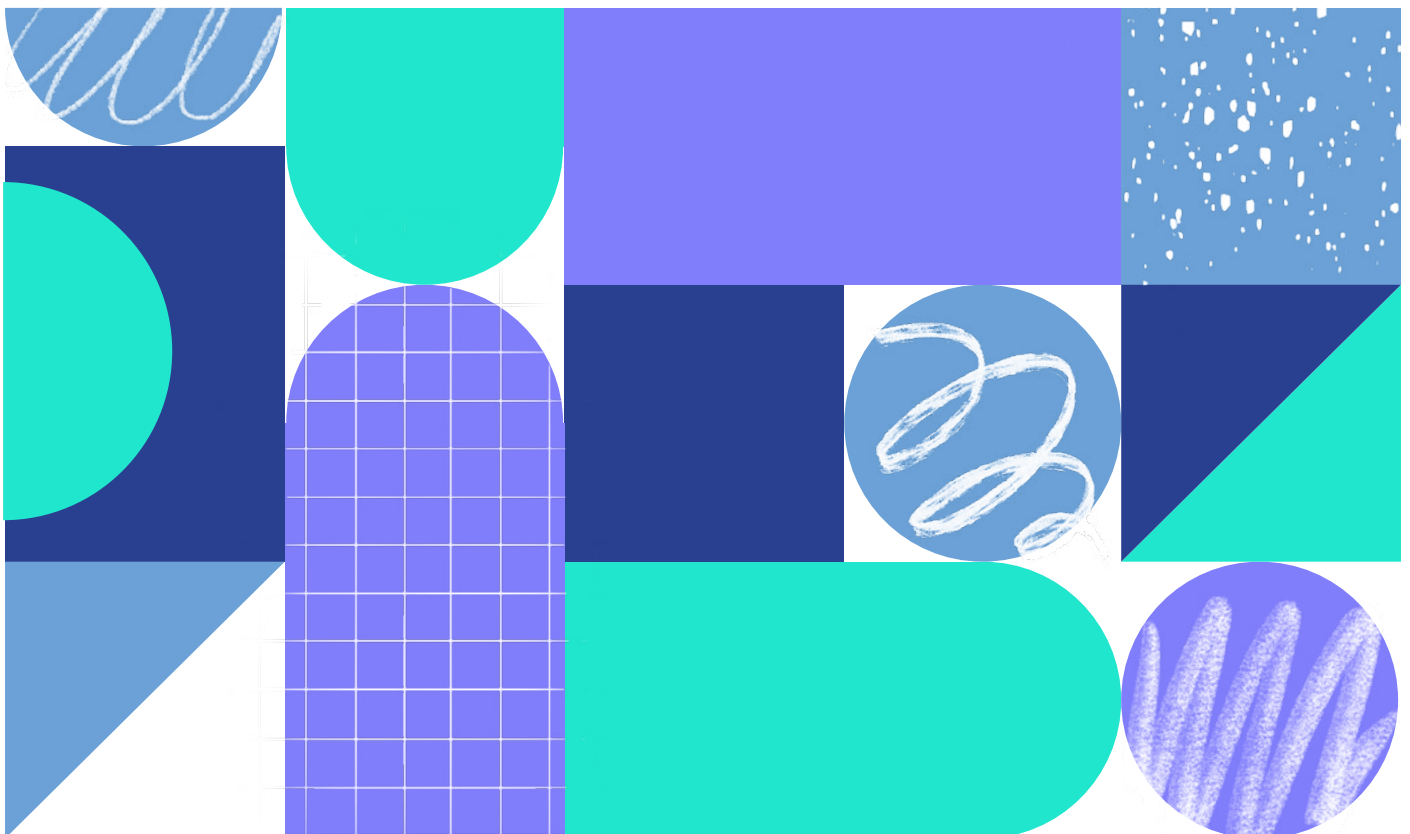
When you think of “being kind” what comes to mind first? Maybe you think about a friend or family member who you know you can rely on for comfort and support, maybe you think of a neighbour who always makes an effort to be friendly when you cross paths, or maybe you think of those who volunteer to help in their communities.

There are many definitions of what it means to be kind and kindness is often entwined with related concepts like empathy, compassion, and altruism. At its core, researchers suggest that kindness is a gesture motivated by genuine, warm feelings for others.¹

Kindness, therefore, is not just an emotion, but is defined by our actions. These “acts of kindness” do not have to be grand gestures. Listening to and being with someone as they talk about a bad day, holding the door for someone who has their arms full, or being accepting towards those around us can all be acts of kindness. However, it is important to note that kindness also involves the perception of others, in that an action we intend to be kind or helpful may not always be perceived by the recipient in that way.² It has been proposed that kindness has three main facets: considering the feelings of others, having everyday acceptance, courtesy and love towards others and behaving honourably towards them.¹

Kindness is also closely related to compassion and altruism. Altruism refers to an action that provides a benefit to someone else but at a cost, or no benefit, to oneself.³ Therefore, many acts of kindness will also be examples of altruism. Compassion is similar to kindness in that it involves feeling empathy and a desire to help, but specifically in the context of the suffering, hardship or distress of others⁴ and so acts of kindness in difficult times may often come from a place of compassion.

It may feel intuitive that kindness can help others, but there is a growing body of research to show that being kind also has benefits for our own mental health and wellbeing. For Mental Health Awareness Week 2020, the Mental Health Foundation has chosen to highlight and celebrate kindness, to others, to ourselves, and in society more broadly, as one way to promote and protect good mental health for all.



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Benefits of **Kindness**

Kindness can have real benefits for our mental health and wellbeing. In April of 2020, the Mental Health Foundation worked with YouGov to conduct an online survey of 4,246 UK adults aged 18+.

We found that



63%

of UK adults agree that **when other people are kind it has a positive impact on their mental health**, and the same proportion agree that being kind to others has a positive impact on their mental health.

Studies have found that being kind is linked to increased feelings of happiness, wellbeing, and life satisfaction⁵⁻⁹ for people of all ages.^{10,11}

Across a range of studies,

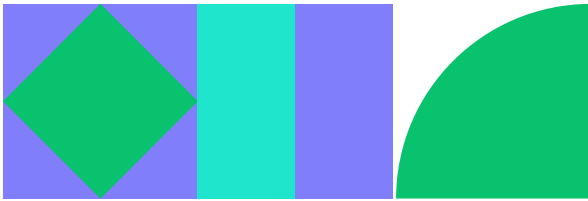
People who carry out acts of kindness are found to experience greater wellbeing.⁵

This seems to be the case regardless of whether the recipient of our kindness is those close to us, society more broadly, or ourselves.⁹ There is even some evidence to suggest that simply remembering kind things we have done in the past may increase our wellbeing.⁶

Such acts of kindness can include behaviours both big and small, from letting someone know how much you appreciate them, to formal volunteering. One study of UK adolescent perspectives of kindness identified a broad range of behaviours that can be considered kind, including things like providing emotional or practical support to others (in both good and bad times), expressing forgiveness of others, being inclusive, and treating others with honesty and generosity.¹²



There are many reasons why kindness may have this positive effect: it can boost our mood, help us feel more capable, and strengthen our relationships with others.¹²⁻¹⁴



There is also some evidence that behaviours that help or benefit others, like kindness, can help us to buffer the negative effects of stress on our health.¹¹ ¹⁵ It has been observed that times of stress can prompt people to respond with empathy and altruism.¹⁶ This tendency towards helping others in times of stress has been called the “tend-and-befriend” response and it has been suggested it is an adaptive response that allows us to reach out to others to provide, and receive, much-needed support in difficult times.¹⁷ In general, kindness is thought to be one of the ways that people create, maintain, and strengthen their social connections,¹³ and there is some evidence that reminding people of their connectedness to those around them may increase their intention to help others.¹⁸

Our motivation for helping others may also play a role in how kindness supports our wellbeing and mental health. When we act with kindness, it generally means our behaviour comes from a place of genuine and warm feelings for others rather than from obligation or anticipation of reward.¹ There is some evidence that those who report helping others or volunteering for proactive reasons (e.g. they feel it is important, they want to help) experience greater benefits compared to those who help because they were told to, or for self-gain.^{19,20}

Overall, there is evidence to suggest that kindness is one important way we can help others and promote and protect our mental health and wellbeing. The effects of kindness may be maximised when it helps us to strengthen our social connections, when it is done voluntarily and for unselfish reasons, and when we feel that we have had a positive effect on others.¹³



When we act with kindness, it generally means our behaviour comes from a place of genuine and warm feelings for others



Cultivating and
Encouraging
Kindness

Being kind and understanding not just to others, but to ourselves, is also important for our mental health and wellbeing, and in our survey, nearly half

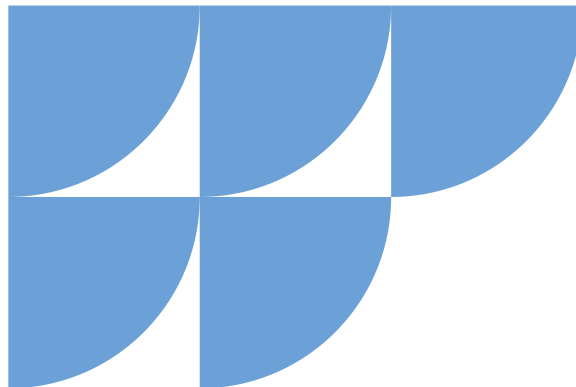
48%

of UK adults agreed that **being kind to themselves has a positive impact on their mental health.**

Our capacity to be kind and compassionate towards ourselves may be influenced by a range of different things, for example, how we see ourselves, and the resources and support available to us. One model of compassion suggests that if we do not believe that someone is deserving of help then we may feel anger or shame instead of compassion; alternatively, if we do not feel we have the resources to cope or help then we may feel anxiety, distress or fear.⁴ One study with university students found that we are more likely to be kind to ourselves when we receive social support and kindness from others,²¹ suggesting that the support of others may help us to be kind to ourselves, but also that when we are kind to ourselves, we are in a better position to be kind to others.



We are more likely to be kind to ourselves when we receive social support and kindness from others²¹



In our survey,

67%

of UK adults agreed that **it is important to look after their own needs as well as be kind to others,** and

41%

agreed that they **try to make sure they make time to be kind to themselves.**

There are different ways in which we can cultivate kindness towards ourselves and others. One approach that is gaining prominence is the practice of loving-kindness meditation, which involves directing unconditional kind attitudes toward oneself and others.²² There is some evidence to suggest that this technique can lead to a range of positive outcomes, including increased wellbeing, feelings of connection with others and self-compassion, and reduced stress and depression symptoms.²²⁻²⁴ These can, in turn, motivate us to engage in behaviours that benefit the wider community.^{24,25}



Gratitude also has an important role to play in encouraging kindness.

When we express gratitude to someone who has helped us, research suggests that this can make them feel more valued and motivate them to act kindly again in future.²⁶ In fact, even just feeling grateful, particularly in response to someone else's kindness, is associated with greater wellbeing and an increase in behaviours that benefit others.²⁷ Interventions that focus on gratitude, particularly those where participants directly act on feelings of gratitude such as writing and delivering a thank-you note, may therefore have a significant part to play in fostering kindness.²⁷

Efforts to nurture kindness at an early age may be prudent, given evidence that kindness and altruistic tendencies may be innate in children.²⁸ School-based kindness interventions, which are often focused on encouraging children

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to carry out intentional acts of kindness, can help children view things from the perspective of others, improve wellbeing and boost their acceptance among peers.^{10,29} The benefits of teaching kindness to children are also likely to extend beyond the children and the direct recipients of kindness - to teachers, classrooms and the wider school community.²⁹

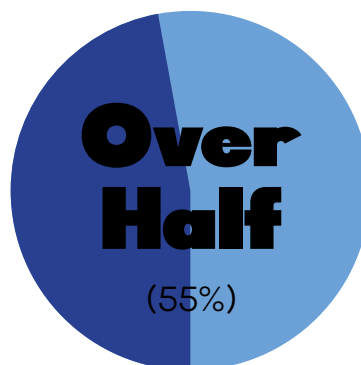
It is clear, then, that kindness can, in turn, inspire kindness.

Evidence suggests that the emotional rewards of engaging in kindness can create a “virtuous circle” that promotes further kindness.¹⁴ To harness this cycle, it is important that kindness is valued within institutions. In the healthcare sector, it has been suggested that a focus on “intelligent kindness”, in which efforts are made to nurture kindness and compassion, could result in wide-reaching improvements in patient satisfaction and staff morale.³⁰

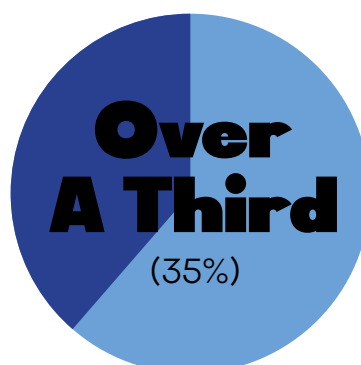
This model posits that if healthcare staff are well supported, and provided with the space to reflect and process the emotions that arise from the challenging work they do, they are more likely to feel safe and affirmed, and their capacity for empathy is likely to expand, resulting in greater trust and connection among staff and patients. This ultimately leads to better outcomes for patients and staff and creates an environment that facilitates more kindness. Organisational decisions are then judged by the degree to which they support this cycle of kindness.³⁰

This represents one model of embedding kindness in the values of organisations which could be applied across a range of sectors and institutions.

In our survey,



of UK adults agree that it is **important that politicians value kindness**, and



Agree that it is **important that politicians prioritise kindness in policy making** (35%) and **service provision** (37%).

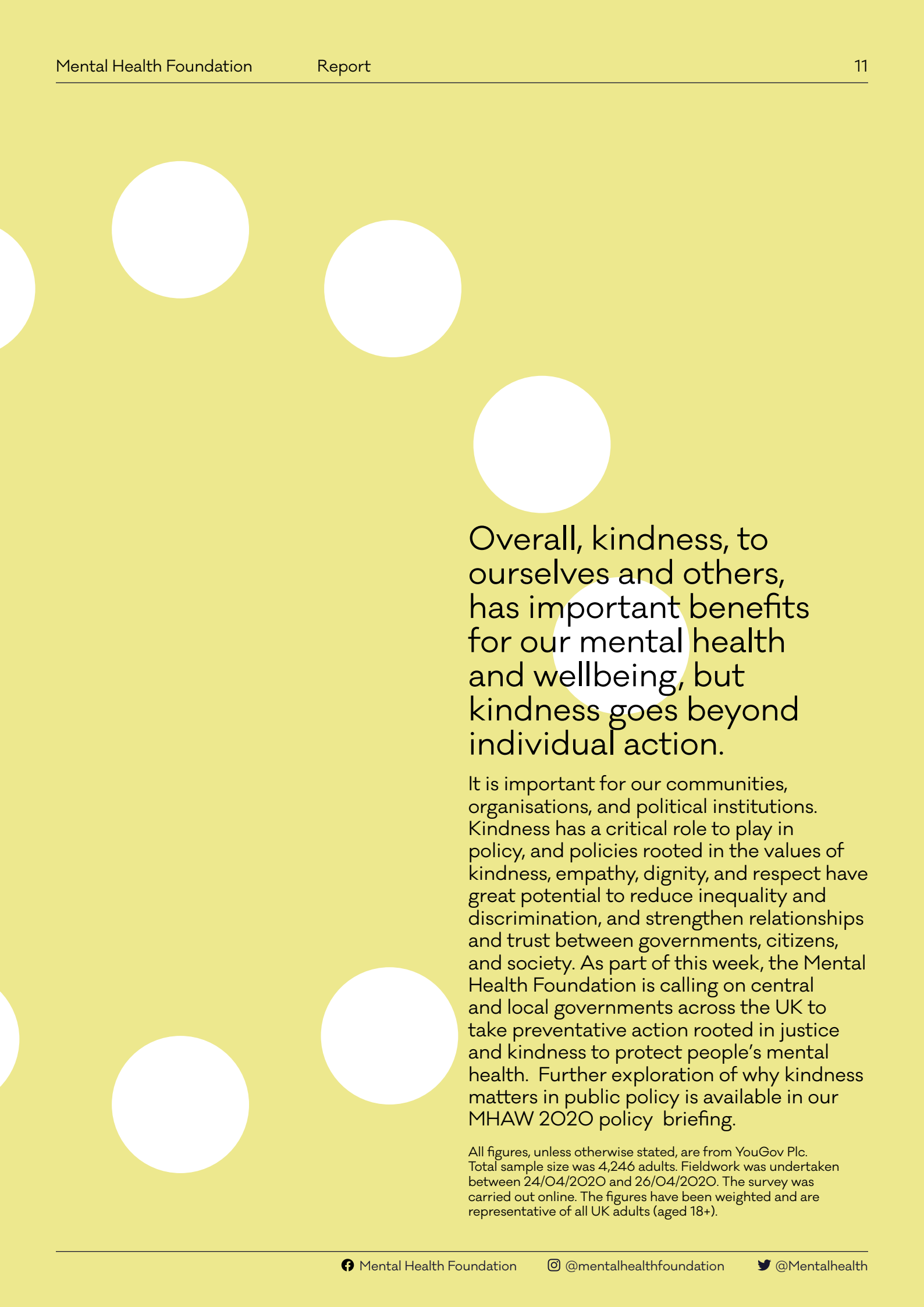
However, when asked specifically about the current pandemic,

40%

of UK adults agreed that it is **important that politicians prioritise kindness in policy making** and

43%

Agreed it is **important politicians prioritise kindness in service provision** after the pandemic.

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Overall, kindness, to ourselves and others, has important benefits for our mental health and wellbeing, but kindness goes beyond individual action.

It is important for our communities, organisations, and political institutions. Kindness has a critical role to play in policy, and policies rooted in the values of kindness, empathy, dignity, and respect have great potential to reduce inequality and discrimination, and strengthen relationships and trust between governments, citizens, and society. As part of this week, the Mental Health Foundation is calling on central and local governments across the UK to take preventative action rooted in justice and kindness to protect people's mental health. Further exploration of why kindness matters in public policy is available in our MHAW 2020 policy briefing.

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 4,246 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 24/04/2020 and 26/04/2020. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+).

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The Mental Health Foundation works to prevent mental health problems. Our vision is of good mental health for all. We will drive change towards a mentally healthy society for all, and support communities, families and individuals to lead mentally healthy lives with a particular focus on those at greatest risk. The Foundation is the home of Mental Health Awareness Week.

