## A Dangerous Assignment

Therapist: Peter R. Breggin, M.D.

**Affiliation:** Psychiatrist in private practice in Bethesda, Maryland; Editor-in-Chief of *Ethical Sciences and Services*; and Director of the International Center for the Study of Psychiatry and Psychology. His website is www.breggin.com.

## Major works:

Breggin, P. R. (2000). *Reclaiming our children: A healing solution for a nation in crisis.* Cambridge, MA: Perseus.

Breggin, P. R., & Cohen, D. (1999). Your drug may be your problem: How and why to stop taking psychiatric medications. Cambridge, MA: Perseus.

Breggin, P. R. (1998). Talking back to Ritalin: What doctors aren't telling you about stimulants for children. Monroe, ME: Common Courage.

Population for whom the technique is appropriate: Any population.

Cautionary notes: It may backfire.

Based on the therapy principle, "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you," I rarely assign homework to my clients. I do, however, urge them to think about what they are learning in therapy, to select what's useful for them, and to apply what is useful to their daily lives between sessions.

There is, however, one exception: a homework assignment that I guarantee will improve my clients' lives and the lives of almost everyone they touch. If only as an experiment for a week or two, I suggest that they try being nice to everyone they meet. I explain, "Before we get together again, try being courteous and kind to everyone you deal with, even people you find unworthy or aggravating."

Some relgions speak of greeting the God within each person we meet; the Quakers talk about addressing "that of God," which is in each of us. Basically, I urge my clients to experiment with treating all other people with respect and even reverence.

Naturally, like most of us, my clients are tempted to dismiss "being nice" as utopian, unmanly, embarrassing, and even dangerous. Rarely does anyone gratefully declare, "That's a great idea, Peter. An application of universal truths to my personal life. I can't wait to put it into action."

For some of my clients, the practice of being nice has transformed their lives. They find, first, that they feel stronger and better when they are continually drawing upon their innermost capacity to be nice. Ultimately they find themselves tapping the soul's energy source—the spiritual stuff we call love. As they experiment with being nice, and even loving, they begin to feel good about actually living by their highest ethical and spiritual values. They also notice that other people—family, friends, cab drivers, waiters and waitresses, and sometimes even their doctors and lawyers—tend to treat them better in return.

My clients also find that this new principle of relationship rarely gets them into trouble. To the contrary, they experience much less conflict with people. And when someone occasionally tries to mistreat them, they enjoy the inner satisfaction of maintaining their own more positive perspective. They are also more able to spot potentially dangerous people.

When we create a welcoming aura around ourselves, it seems to throw a bright, contrasting light on anyone who approaches us with negative attentions. By contrast, when we ourselves are internally obscured by the dim light of negativity, we are less likely to recognize and to protect ourselves from the hostility of others.

There is one grave danger in recommending that our clients try being nice as a regular practice in their lives. It can backfire on us. Our clients may notice when we, as therapists, aren't being so courteous and respectful toward them all the time. Any day now, one of my patients could say to me, "Peter, I do my homework, now you do yours." Naturally, I will be tempted to protest that it's utopian, naïve, dangerous—and besides the rule doesn't apply to therapists because . . . well, just because.

When I do apply the principle in my own therapy practice—when I do greet each of my clients as an expression of God, as someone to be treasured as highly as any other human being on this earth—it seems to help both of us feel and act to the best of our ability. It's mutually therapeutic. I urge all therapists to make it homework for themselves.