

Two Studies Show Volunteers Live Longer and Happier Lives

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By Jenny Santi / Tarcher/Penguin

Those who reported at least 200 hours of volunteer work per year were 40 percent less likely to develop high blood pressure.

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The following is an excerpt from the book [The Giving Way to Happiness](#) by Jenny Santi (TarcherPerigee, 2016):

The first study to intentionally examine the effect of motives of volunteers on their subsequent mortality was conducted in 2011 by a team led by Sarah Konrath of the University of Michigan.^[i] Respondents who volunteered were found to be at lower risk for mortality four years later, especially among those who volunteered more regularly and frequently. The study showed that volunteers live longer than non-volunteers—but this is only true if they volunteer for specific reasons.



What reasons?

There are a multitude of reasons to volunteer, but these can basically be classified under two reasons: self-focus and other-focus. Self-focus refers to motives that explicitly consider some personal reward such as improving one's mood or self-esteem, escaping one's problems, learning a new skill, or even getting a promotion or enhancing one's social connections. These are all legitimate reasons to volunteer that are not good or bad in themselves. Other-focus refers to a genuine concern for something beyond oneself.

In 2005, researcher Omri Gilliath and colleagues found that college undergraduates who volunteer because they have compassion for needy people (i.e. other-focus) indeed derive the most interpersonal benefits from volunteering:

They are less lonely and have fewer interpersonal problems. Researcher Sarah Konrath's 2011 study likewise found that volunteers live longer than non-volunteers – but only if they volunteer for other-oriented reasons.

Researchers from University of British Columbia's Faculty of Education and Department of Psychology were curious to see how volunteering might impact physical health, particularly among adolescents. The researchers found that just one hour of volunteering per week improved the health of adolescents.^[ii] For the study, researchers split 106 tenth-grade students from an inner-city Vancouver high school into two groups – one group that volunteered regularly for ten weeks and a group that was wait-listed for volunteer activities. The researchers measured the students' body mass index (BMI), inflammation and cholesterol levels before and after the study. They also assessed the students' self-esteem, mental health, mood, and empathy.

The volunteer group of students spent one hour per week working with elementary school children in afterschool



programs in their neighborhood. After ten weeks they had lower levels of inflammation and cholesterol and lower BMIs than the students who were wait-listed.

“The volunteers who reported the greatest increases in empathy, altruistic behavior and mental health were the ones who also saw the greatest improvements in their cardiovascular health,” says Hannah Schreier, now a postdoctoral fellow at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, in New York. “It was encouraging to see how a social intervention to support members of the community also improved the health of adolescents.”

The same is true for older adults. Research from Carnegie Mellon University shows that volunteering for at least two hundred hours per year (four hours a week) dramatically lowers blood pressure in older adults. High blood pressure or hypertension triggers a chain reaction in adults that often leads to morbidity due to cardiovascular conditions. “Everyday, we are learning more about how negative lifestyle factors like poor diet and lack of exercise increase hypertension risk,” said Rodlescia S. Sneed, a Ph.D. candidate in psychology in Carnegie Mellon’s Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences. “We wanted to determine if a positive lifestyle factor like volunteer work could actually reduce disease risk. And, the results give older adults an example of something that they can actively do to remain healthy and age successfully.” For the study, Sneed and her team studied 1,164 adults between the ages of fifty-one and ninety-one from across the U.S. The participants were interviewed twice, in 2006 and 2010, and all had normal blood pressure levels at the first interview. Volunteerism, various social and psychological factors, and blood pressure were measured each time.

The results showed that those who reported at least two hundred hours of volunteer work during the initial interview were 40 percent less likely to develop hypertension than those who did not volunteer when evaluated four years later. The specific type of volunteer activity was not a factor — only the amount of time spent volunteering led to increased protection from hypertension.

“As people get older, social transitions like retirement, bereavement and the departure of children from the home often leave older adults with fewer natural opportunities for social interaction,” Sneed said. “Participating in volunteer activities may provide older adults with social connections that they might not have otherwise. There is strong evidence that having good social connections promotes healthy aging and reduces risk for a number of negative health outcomes.”

[i] Sarah Konrath, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan and University of Rochester Medical Center; Andrea Fuhrel-Forbis, Center for Bioethics and Social Sciences in Medicine, Department of Internal Medicine, University of Michigan; Alina Lou, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan; Stephanie Brown, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan and Stony Brook Medical Center. Motives for Volunteering Are Associated With Mortality Risk in Older Adults. 2011 American Psychological Association.

[ii] “Doing Good is Good for You: Volunteer Adolescents Enjoy Healthier Hearts,” JAMA Pediatrics.

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