How Helping Others Helps Yourself: Positive personal and mental effects of volunteering

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How helping others helps yourself

THE benefits of volunteer organisations are widely known.

Most recently in Queensland, the flood crises ignited a far-reaching community response and strangers shoveled mud and debris from houses of people they had never met. They shared sandwiches and tears and volunteers took leave from their jobs to help out.

From the Australian Royal Flying Doctors to Marine Rescue services, it seems people are happy to offer their services voluntarily without payment or recognition. Often called the helpers’ high, random acts of kindness as well as taking part in organised events can increase your sense of well-being and optimism.

We saw how easily the ripple effect can happen in the movie Pay It Forward with Haley Joel Osment and Kevin Spacey. The concept of doing a good deed and asking the recipients to pay it forward may have seemed magical in the movie but in reality, it also appears completely achievable and realistic.

Benevolence or acts of generosity are designed to benefit the recipient but did you know those good Samaritan deeds could actually be good for your own health?

In a recent US trial testing the health benefits of participating in a volunteer program, John Hopkins Medical researchers have found that giving back to the community is a win-win and may slow the ageing process. Published in the Journal of Urban Health, Dr Linda P. Fried suggested volunteers showed signs of better physical, mental and social activity and that volunteering might just impact a higher quality of life.

Other studies have found that volunteering can play a role in increasing your overall sense of well-being, alleviating chronic pain, and even reducing depression.

A common theme that seems to appear with charity work is that those involved discuss making connections and having a sense of purpose when volunteering.

It gets quite specific, too. A review of current research also suggests that volunteering is especially beneficial to older adults, and to those who serve 100 volunteer hours a year.

It seems this commonly known activity of volunteering is also gaining credibility in the sciences. A new field called psychoneuroimmunology or PNI for short, is showing that antibodies which help the body defend against infection are strengthened when one engages in charity work.

Harvard psychologist David McClelland has measured this in students who watched a film of Mother Teresa and found that just by watching someone else perform selfless acts of service, this immune system response increased.

So what can you do right now? It seems five small acts of kindness per week, particularly a variety of them, all in one day, can boost our moods. Hormones such as dopamine increase in the brain when we help others and activate our brains pleasure centres. So get together as a family or in the workplace and brainstorm some ideas for helping others. Share at the end of the day the random acts of kindness you might have performed. Talk about how it made you feel and how it might have made the other person feel.

So while we have typically known that helping others – whether it be with random acts of kindness or engaging in a structured volunteering program – can make you feel warm and generous, we now know it can have profound effects for your mental and physical health.

It makes sense that its good to do good. And just watch how contagious it can be!

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