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## GENEROSITY AND HEALTH

**We give to make someone else's life better.** But when we give, we experience benefits ourselves—including those to our health, longevity, relationships, and economic prosperity. **Hundreds of studies show benefits** for young and old, well and ill, those who give time, and those who give money. In some cases, the impact is so compelling that **giving is integral to clinical treatment and therapy.**



## HEALTH

Giving time reduces cardiovascular risk factors among adolescents. In the first experimental study to test the effect of volunteering, researchers designed a randomized controlled trial with measurements taken at baseline and then four months later. Adolescents assigned to volunteer showed significantly lower interleukin 6 levels, cholesterol levels, and body mass index compared with adolescents in the control group. They showed no significant differences from the control group before volunteering.<sup>1</sup>

Most studies about giving time revolve around healthy individuals, but giving also correlates with better outcomes among individuals with high-risk chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease. One longitudinal study found that those who spent up to 200 hours in the past year helping others had fewer new cardiovascular events and were less likely to die in the subsequent two years compared to non-helpers. Providing up to 100 hours of assistance was also associated with fewer depressive symptoms.<sup>2</sup>

### GIVING TO OTHERS IS A BETTER PREDICTOR OF HEALTH AND WELL-BEING THAN RECEIVING SUPPORT

United Health Group's *Doing Good is Good for You* describes many ways those who give time feel it impacts their health and well-being. These include the fact that 94% of volunteers say that giving time improves their mood, 76% say it makes them feel healthier, and 25% say it helps them manage a chronic illness.<sup>3</sup>

## LONGEVITY

Stress from things like job loss, burglary, financial difficulty, or serious but non-life-threatening illness usually increases risk of early death. But if we help others, we may lower this risk. A study of 846 people encountering life stress found that helping others predicted reduced mortality—even after accounting for differences in age, baseline health and functioning, and psychosocial variables between helpers and non-helpers. Those who did not help others experienced a 30% increase in risk of early death. Those who helped others had no such increase.<sup>4</sup>

### CRITICAL CARE NURSES ARE ASKING HOW GIVING FITS INTO THE PLAN OF CARE<sup>5</sup>

Recently, researchers asked whether volunteering should be considered a public health intervention. Although more work needs to be done to support that conclusion, they did find in a meta-analysis involving 40 papers that volunteering had favorable effects on depression, life satisfaction, and well-being. Meta-analysis of five cohort studies showed volunteers have a 22% reduced risk of mortality.<sup>6</sup>

## PROSPERITY

People who give are also more likely to prosper financially. A brilliant analysis done by Arthur Brooks involving 30,000 families showed that every dollar in charitable contributions leads to a marginal increase of \$3.75 in income. Interestingly, this same pattern shows up with those who give time and other things such as blood. Brooks also explored the way countries become richer as people give more away. He contends that if we were to increase our charitable donations by just one percent, it would translate into a growth in gross domestic product of 39 billion dollars.<sup>7,8</sup>

Over 40 studies show the link between giving and business outcomes. In his book *Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success*, Grant provides a stunning look at how generosity drives prosperity across a range of professions. He looks at the way people go through life as takers, givers, or matchers seeking tit for tat reciprocity. It's not takers who end up succeeding most strongly. Rather, it's a special kind of giver who protects their own well-being while orienting their life to others.<sup>9</sup>

## RECOVERY

One of the largest clinical trials of alcoholism treatment ever undertaken was Project MATCH involving 1,726 patients. An analysis of this study shows 40% of alcoholics who helped others avoided taking a drink in the 12 months following treatment compared to 22% of those not helping.<sup>10</sup> Many other studies have shown the relationship between helping and positive outcomes in substance abuse. Maria Pagano, involved in groundbreaking work in this area, is currently looking at the impact of helping on recovery of adolescents with substance abuse in a project called Helping Others.<sup>11,12</sup>

## RELATIONSHIPS

The impact of generosity on marriage is a new area of inquiry. The first study exploring this involved 2,730 spouses. Researchers looked at generosity in the form of small acts of kindness, displays of respect and affection, and a willingness to forgive one's spouse of faults and failings. Generosity was associated with an increase in marital quality, decrease in marital conflict, and decrease in participants' subjective divorce likelihood. Specifically, every one-unit increase of spouses' reported generosity was associated with a 0.35-point increase in participants' reported marital quality, a 0.17-point decrease in participants' reports of marital conflict, and a 0.56-point decrease in participants' subjective divorce likelihood.<sup>13</sup>

## HAPPINESS

People randomly assigned to perform acts of kindness as well as those randomly assigned to give money to others report increases in happiness relative to control groups.<sup>14,15</sup> Now we're beginning to understand why. Neuroscientists have used fMRI to look at the brains of people deciding whether to give money to charity.<sup>16</sup> Those choosing to give to charity experienced activation in areas of the brain associated with reward and pleasure. Intriguingly, data from the longest-standing set of observations on happiness in the world show altruism does more than create temporary good feelings—it is the one thing able to permanently move our “happiness set point.”<sup>17</sup>

### STUDIES ACROSS 120 COUNTRIES SHOW A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GIVING AND HAPPINESS<sup>18</sup>

The emotional high we attain from giving begins early in life, even before age two. A recent study showed toddlers exhibit greater happiness when giving treats to others than when they received treats for themselves. And the greatest happiness came from *costly giving*—forfeiting one's own resources—rather than giving a treat at no cost.<sup>19</sup> Nonhuman animals and even rodents are similarly wired for empathy and altruism. One provocative study found that rats prefer helping others to feasting on chocolate.<sup>20</sup>



## JOB SATISFACTION

Job satisfaction is at a twenty-year low in the United States. Many organizations have experimented with personal or team bonuses. But what would be the effect of going beyond this to give employees money they could spend on improving the lives of others? Recently a bank, sports team, and pharmaceutical organization decided to find out. Researchers randomly assigned employees (or athletes in the case of the sports team) to receive a prosocial bonus—money they could give to a charity, co-worker, or person in need. Those who received money to give to others increased performance and experienced greater happiness and job satisfaction.<sup>21</sup>