

Altruism, happiness and health

Looking outwards and helping others through volunteering, rather than focusing narrowly on our own concerns, can increase our sense of purpose and meaning and improve physical and mental health.

People don't necessarily volunteer because they are expecting a reward, or they think it will improve their health. Most do it because they hope to benefit others. Some people want to gain new skills or see it as a step towards a career. Others volunteer because generosity, or charity, is part of their religious practice. For people who are regular volunteers, volunteering for its own sake becomes a strong motivator, rather than volunteering for any particular cause.

Although most won't set out to volunteer for the sake of their health, volunteers do experience greater happiness and better health. Volunteering is associated with less stress, better life adjustment, fewer feelings of hopelessness or

depression, better coping, better physical health and longer life expectancy.

There are many reasons why volunteering has health benefits. It usually offers opportunities to socialise and make friends. This can be particularly important for people who are retired or elderly and at risk of physical decline, inactivity and social isolation, or of feeling unproductive.

The physical health benefits may be directly related to the type of work someone does. In Australia, a large proportion of volunteers are active in sporting clubs. They may be coaches, for example, which means increased physical and outdoor activity.

Volunteering improves a person's sense of self-worth and purpose, which may help to protect against depression. There are other rewards from volunteering, including gratitude from others and the satisfaction

that comes from being able to work in accordance with one's values.

The amount of volunteer work a person does may be important for health. An American study found that the more frequently someone volunteered, the more their wellbeing increased. Going from monthly to weekly volunteering improved wellbeing to the same degree that a very substantial pay increase did.

People who volunteer report being more confident and satisfied with life. Volunteers trained to provide telephone peer support report greater self-esteem and self-confidence and reduced depression. Former alcoholics who support and mentor alcoholics attempting to give up their addiction are less likely to relapse.

People who volunteer may be happier because they develop empathic emotions. Importantly, helping others means we are less focused on ourselves. Self-involvement can have adverse effects on health; an early study found an association between heart disease and high numbers of self-references ('I, me, my') in speech. It's been said that when we are too involved with

our own worries and concerns, it's like a weight pressing down, but when we open our eyes and look outwards, the clouds part and the sun shines through.

Want to volunteer?

- Look for an organisation or a cause that you believe is important, and ideally get involved working with others.
- Find work that suits you and adds to your enjoyment of life.
- Balance your giving with a greater awareness of receiving.
- Be realistic about how much time you can commit.
- If volunteering starts to feel like a burden, is making you feel very sad about the world or critical of yourself or others, pause and think things through. While volunteers report having better mental health than non-volunteers, going beyond your limits could worsen mental health.
- If you're someone who volunteers a lot, remind yourself occasionally that you can't fix everything and you'll never be perfect, but you are doing your best.

“The best things in life aren't things.”

Art Buchwald and John Ruskin

DID YOU KNOW...

About 35% of Australians over 18 years volunteer at least once a year. There is a small group of volunteers known as 'highly committed volunteers', who volunteer for more than 300 hours, or even more than 600 hours per year. These Australians often work in law or justice fields, with environmental and animal welfare groups and with international aid agencies. They often volunteer for several organisations.

Volunteer's stories

Helping acid burns survivors

Generosity has always been part of Sister Marie Doolan's life. As a child growing up in country Victoria, she witnessed generosity in action.

“My parents were very good and generous and aware of other people and their needs. They took in neighbours whose marriages broke up, whose homes burnt down, who couldn't pay their rent. My sisters and brothers and I got used to moving over to share a bed, to make room.”

Her conviction about sharing was part of her decision to become a nun at the age of 19.

“My parents would say that God had given me many gifts, and gifts were meant to be shared. The generosity of my parents was outstanding. My brothers

and sisters are still really aware of other people's needs – they offer before they're asked.”

Marie has worked in many areas: with offenders, in special education, as a school principal and as a dressmaker. Although she is in her 70s and has retired “several times”, her days are devoted to caring for others. For the past two decades, she has been a compression garment consultant and educator assisting people with lymphoedema, after receiving specialist training in Australia and the USA.

When she was approached to begin working on compression garments in the 1980s, Marie “really hadn't heard of lymphoedema”. She says it has taken years to refine the techniques for making custom compression garments.

In 2010, an aid agency approached Marie and asked her to travel as a volunteer to centres in Bangladesh and Cambodia to train acid burns survivors. Acid throwing is an act of domestic violence and there are thousands of burns survivors in these countries, as well as other parts of the world. Battery acid is usually thrown at the victim's face, and may cause blindness and severe tissue damage. Most victims are women, who suffer many physical and psychological consequences and are frequently socially isolated and stigmatised.

“I was asked if I would go to Bangladesh to train women acid survivors how to make compression garments, which are used in the healing process and enables them to come back into society.” ➔