GOOD DEEDS, GOOD HEALTH, GOOD LIFE

It’s not always easy to motivate ourselves to help other people, but it increasingly seems it’s in our interests to try. A growing body of research shows the health benefits of acting for others.

BY KATE ROPE

Rick Adle credits helping others with getting his life back after a gruesome yard-work injury 25 years ago. Adle, a commodities trader in Atlanta, Ga., was pulling up tree stumps in his front yard when the 6,000-pound tractor he was driving flipped over. Adle’s pelvis separated from his spine and he broke his back in three places.

“They thought I wasn’t going to survive,” he says. “They had to teach me how to walk again.”

It was a grueling year, and Adle could have been forgiven for thinking about nothing but his recovery. In that same period, however, he learned that a church near his home had burned down. A devout Christian, he could not ignore that tragedy. “I felt like there had to be a reason I didn’t die,” he says.

When Adle had recovered from two surgeries and months of rehabilitation, he got together with a friend and recruited a team of volunteers to build a new church for the congregation. “After I was able to do that,” he says, “I felt like I could do anything.”

And the years since have proved that self-assessment correct. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Adle went to Mississippi to help families rebuild; then he started going to Mexico to build houses for people in need. Now 70 and retired, he and a friend organize a yearly trip to take dental students to Haiti to offer free care.

Adle’s faith in the life-changing power of giving service is backed up by a large and growing body of research that shows tangible physical and mental benefits.
tal health benefits to doing unto others as you would hope they would do unto you.

“People who are givers are happier and across the board tend to have better mental health,” says Stephen Post, author of Why Good Things Happen to Good People: How to Live a Longer, Happier, Healthier Life by the Simple Act of Giving. “They also show up with better health generally and may even on average live a little longer.”

Post has devoted his career to exploring this surprising idea and is a bit of an evangelist for the field of research. In fact, in a 2017 review of the science, he argued that the benefits of service are so great that care providers should actually prescribe volunteering (in increments of about two hours per week) to their patients.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

The health benefits of giving are not easy to quantify, and the research admittedly relies at least in part on the subjective experiences of the volunteers themselves, but the sheer number of such experiences is very difficult to deny. A 2010 online survey of more than 4,500 Americans found that 96% of people who volunteered reported that it made them happier and 68% said it made them “feel physically healthier.” In addition, more than three quarters of respondents reported that it increased their sense of purpose, lowered stress levels, improved overall emotional health and—as Adle experienced—improved their longevity, and may even on average live a little longer. In one study, she found that volunteers were more likely to use preventive health care, and, perhaps as a result, they spent 38% fewer nights in the hospital. “Volunteers were 30% more likely to get that flu shot and 47% more likely to get cholesterol tests,” says Konrath. “Female volunteers were more likely to get mammograms and pap smears and male volunteers more likely to receive prostate exams.”

If the results don’t have to do with the pre-existing behaviors of the volunteers but rather with something that flows from the act of volunteering itself, what is that something? Is it that you are more physically active, or that volunteering improves your social connections, which is associated with better health? Or is it something else entirely?

The answer is complicated, and investigators try to control for all possible variables before they can tease out which are the relevant ones. They also are working to determine what aspects of health are most benefited by volunteering.

Two 2013 studies, for example, showed that volunteering may improve heart health. In one, older adults (ages 51 to 91) who volunteered about four hours per week were 40% less likely to have high blood pressure than those who did not volunteer. The other study—a groundbreaking paper published in JAMA Pediatrics in 2013—found that volunteering improved cardiovascular health in adolescents, which may put them on a path for better heart health throughout their lives.

Hannah Schreier, an assistant professor of behavioral health at Penn State University, split 106 Canadian high school sophomores into two groups. One group volunteered weekly in an elementary school and the other was kept on a waiting list for volunteering opportunities (one of the only ways to create a control group in volunteering studies). “Three months later, those who had volunteered had significantly lower cholesterol levels and body mass index,” says Schreier. They also had lower levels of interleukin 6, a chemical in the blood that is associated with higher levels of inflammation. Perhaps most intriguing, Schreier says, is that “when we looked at empathy and altruism, we saw that [among volunteers], those who had higher levels of altruism had the lowest cholesterol levels and the ones with highest empathy had the lowest inflammatory levels.” That suggests that why you help others might be important to the health benefits you get from the work.

YOUR REASONS COUNT

Although “no one has nailed down a single precise mechanism by which engaging in helping behavior improves health and well-being,” says Michael Poulin, an associate professor in the department of psychology at the University of Buffalo in New York, “we do know that motives seem to matter.”

In a 2012 study, Konrath found that when people volunteered for reasons related to themselves—such as wanting to learn a new skill or try new things—they had a marginally significant increase in their chance of dying during a four-year period. But those who volunteered because they were thinking about others lowered their mortality risk significantly. And the more they identified with being motivated by others, the greater they decreased their risk.
which meant we had to be born sooner than other things like abstract thought and complex language, became high-level mammals with brains capable of that contribute to that fact. The first was when we term ruthlessness can be beneficial, but long-term lar view of survival of the fittest, says Doty, “Short- at Stanford Medical School. Contrary to the popu- lous and Altruism Research and Education Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education, says Doty pinpoints two critical moments in evolution “other people are good and benevolent, “ says Pou- lins research suggests that how you perceive “There’s a whole body of literature that shows to respond to others in our group who are suffering. “ says Doty. “You have what’s called a ‘warm glow. ‘ ” Layered on top of that are changes that happened to hunter-gatherer tribes of 10 to 50 members. “If someone was in distress or suffering, they potentially could put the tribe or group at risk because they are not doing their job,” says Doty. “So we also responded to those within our tribe or group, because this was a survival strategy for our genes. We have this capacity to respond to others in our group who are suffering.” And we are rewarded individually when we do it. “When you care and nurture another, you tap into your parasympathetic nervous system, which gives you a sense of a sense of calmness and inclusiveness,” says Doty. “This is when your physiology works best, and that is the origin of this warm glow.” That, in turn, says Doty, may explain the stress- and anxiety-relieving effects of volunteering.

As Charles Darwin wrote in The Descent of Man, “We are impelled to relieve the sufferings of another in order that our painful feelings may be at the same time relieved.”

But why do we want to help strangers who, in theory, can offer nothing to ourselves or our tribe? Studies show that when people are given intranasal oxytocin (to mimic the release they would naturally get in a caregiving moment), they feel a bond or connection to other people in their close network. However, that same hormone spritz does not make them want to connect with people outside their group.

And yet Rick Adle wanted to help people so far outside his immediate group that they lived thousands of miles away. In his case, the answer could be found in more recent research that suggests that you can overcome the disconnections of tribal distinc- tions just by “looking at others and thinking of the things you have in common,” says Doty. Consider the de- sire for peace in a community or the need for basic things such as shelter and food—universal values. When subjects tap into “this idea of common humanity, it breaks down this tribal separ- aration and you have more of a response from oxy- tocin,” says Doty.

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But there are limits: Fulgini’s research has found higher levels of inflammation in those who are bur- dened by too many duties around the house, and that same too-much-of-a-good-thing idea follows us out of the home too. Volunteering much more than two hours per week can have diminishing returns, wrote Post in his 2017 re- view article. “Overdose” is possible when “helping be- comes stressful and poten- tially harmful,” he adds.

Poulin has found that when individuals are tak- ing care of a sick spouse, the positive emotions they gain from caregiving are depen- dent upon how they see the relationship. “If you believe the relationship is too dependent and not lopsided, providing help tends to increase the incidence of positive emotions.” If the relationship feels one- sided to the participants, on the other hand, Pou- lin says it increases negative emotions in caregivers.

And those whose professional work involves taking care of others (such as health care and social workers, pastors, and teachers) are at risk of expe- rience compassion fatigue. For them, writes Post, “the need is not for volunteering so much as for balance and care of self.”

For everyone else, Post’s prescription varies. The research, he says, supports as much as four hours per week for older retired adults and as little as one hour for adolescents. Regardless of dose, his prognosis is clear: “When you get your mind off the problems of the self and just ask, ‘What can I do to contribute to the lives of others?’ you’re in a very healthy space.”