

Giving Promotes Health

By Karen O'Hara

In August, I wrote about the importance of safety awareness after returning home from a road trip with my sister, Lynn. Sitting by the campfire on that trip, we developed a strategy for getting rid of unwanted stuff that had accumulated in her garage, house and garden.

We never imagined there would soon be no stuff left.

A few months later a different kind of Camp Fire incinerated the town of Paradise, Calif., where she had raised her family and retired after teaching elementary school for 30 years. The Camp Fire quickly destroyed an estimated 14,000 homes and 500 businesses. To date, the remains of 88 people have been identified.

Among the many challenges a loss of this magnitude presents, I've observed that feeling helpless is a significant one. My sister is particularly distressed about her inability to help relieve the suffering of others who have lost their homes and livelihoods.

Lynn is a generous person and has always been the giver, not the receiver. After a lifetime of paying it forward to help family members, friends, students and community members, she's having a hard time accepting generous offers of support. I keep reminding her that she's doing people a favor by accepting their "gifts" because it is good for their health.

Benefits of Giving

Physical and mental health benefits associated with giving money, material goods or one's time in support of a worthy cause are well-documented. For example, studies show that people who volunteer in their communities feel happier and notice improvements in their self-esteem.

Volunteerism is associated with health measures such as:

- Reduced symptoms of depression
- Lower levels of stress and anxiety
- Improved sleep quality
- Lower blood pressure



"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."

— Mahatma Gandhi

- Fewer functional limitations
- Stronger immune system
- Increased longevity

In *one study*, researchers said volunteering should be "promoted as a kind of healthy lifestyle, especially for social subgroups of elders, ethnic minorities, those with little education, single people and unemployed people, who generally have poorer health and less participation in volunteering."

How Does It Work?

Doing good, or altruism, is associated with the release of chemicals in your brain and their complex interactions. These include oxytocin, the “love hormone”; serotonin, which plays a role in sleep quality, appetite and arousal; and dopamine, which affects behavior, emotion and cognition. These hormones counteract the effects of adrenaline and cortisol.

Adrenaline increases heart rate, elevates blood pressure and boosts energy supplies. It helps trigger the fight-or-flight response. Cortisol, the primary stress hormone, increases sugars (glucose) in the bloodstream, enhances brain function and helps repair tissues. Cortisol also alters immune system responses and suppresses digestive, reproductive and growth processes.

The long-term activation of the stress-response system – and subsequent overexposure to cortisol and other stress hormones – can disrupt almost all of your body’s processes. This puts you at increased risk of numerous health problems, according to medical experts.

Did You Know?

There is a strong correlation between the well-being, happiness, health and longevity of people who are emotionally and behaviorally compassionate. However, there is a caveat: Like putting on the oxygen mask first, you have to take good care of yourself and avoid over-committing in order to be of service to others.

12 Reason to Give

You’ve heard of the 12 Days of Christmas. Here are 12 ways you can benefit from being a giver this holiday season and year-round:

1. **Friendship:** When you connect with the people you are helping, you cultivate friendships with them and others in their circle, reducing feelings of loneliness.
2. **Resources:** Supporting non-profit organizations and community resources is an opportunity to learn about them; you may need to use them yourself someday.
3. **Self-esteem:** Studies show that volunteering builds confidence and contributes to self-worth. This is especially beneficial for teenagers and older adults.
4. **Skills:** Donating time can be used to develop career and life skills. You can also use your professional experience and training to help others.
5. **Hobbies:** Pursing a hobby outside of work is shown to reduce stress and increase contentment. Hobbies that involve socializing, creative arts or animal care can be particularly rewarding.
6. **Fitness:** Many volunteer jobs require some degree of physical activity. Staying physically fit boosts your energy level and improves overall health.
7. **Live Longer:** Studies show that the intrinsic benefits of giving include a longer, healthier life and reduced likelihood of developing dementia.
8. **Meaning:** Giving combats depression and other mental health conditions by adding a sense of purpose to your life. Look for causes that have deep meaning to you.
9. **Golden Rule:** Treating others the way you want to be treated is a good way to teach children about sharing and demonstrate the importance of helping others who have less.
10. **Tax Savings:** If you itemize deductions on your federal tax return, you may be entitled to claim a charitable deduction for donations. There are lots of ways to put tax savings to good use.
11. **Productivity:** There is evidence that people who are happy are more productive at work. Collecting donations and volunteering time can be a unifying experience for a company or organization.
12. **Light-heartedness:** It’s easy to feel overwhelmed by the challenges we face in our daily lives. Giving back helps lighten the load.