

Why Giving is Good for You

Written by Written by Amy Strand

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It's no question that spending some unselfish time bettering the community is a noble thing to do. What you may not realize is that in the process of giving back you're also helping someone extremely valuable in your own life: you.



Arizonans are certainly passionate about giving: whether it's in time, talents, services or their hard-earned dough, residents of our sunshine-filled state make sure our communities are the best they can possibly be. The Corporation for National and Community Service reports that in 2007, Arizona's 1.1 million volunteers spent 182.2 hours dedicating their time to various organizations.

"In Arizona, as givers, we do pretty well," says Robert Ashcraft, director of the ASU Lodestar Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Innovation. "We're a generous place."

Ashcraft, who was a part of the research team that compiled the center's 2008 Arizona Giving and Volunteering study, found that nearly 6 out of 10 Arizonans made a financial contribution to a charitable organization over the past year, giving approximately 3 percent of their annual household income.

It's a given that this altruistic attitude is valuable to those receiving the help, but it's proven that while making sure others are taken care of, your own precious health and well-being benefits as well.

The Healthy Helper

When seeking to help others, your mind and body take notice. One way giving back positively affects our health is through what experts call a "helper's high." Allan Luks, former executive director of the Institute for Advancement of Health and executive director of Big Brothers/Big Sisters of New York City, refers to the helper's high as "phase one" of the benefits to givers in his book "The Healing Power of Doing Good: The Health and Spiritual Benefits of Helping Others." Luks describes this initial response as, "the powerful physical reaction that begins with a burst of energy and good feelings and is a sign that unhealthy, fatiguing stress has decreased in our bodies."

Luks conducted a national survey of more than 3,000 people, and 95 percent felt the physical reaction of the helper's high. Of those fuzzy feelings, 54 percent of people said they felt sensations of warmth, 29 percent felt increased energy, 21 percent felt a drug-like euphoria, and more than half of the volunteers experienced additional physical and emotional advantages. These uplifting sensations are most likely drawn from the release of endorphins, neurotransmitters that help to create a sense of well-being and diminished pain in our bodies.

"There's no question that there's a link between the giving behavior and the physiological expression that people have," Ashcraft says. "The gift of giving helps the giver as much as the beneficiary."

It's All in Your Head

Among physical benefits like lower mortality rates, stronger immune systems and a decrease in physical pain, humanitarian acts are said to have mind-healing qualities as well.

If you're a regular traveler down the helper's highway, you'll know that its euphoric high is not always a lasting sensation. The second phase produces a calming effect on the helper, much like that found through meditation. These calm feelings are similar whether you are practicing yoga or helping out at the local hospital; both activities will allow you to become focused on that which is outside of yourself. In turn, this helps reduce overall stress.

It has been noted that this stress reduction also stems from an increase in self-worth; in fact, 57 percent of those surveyed by Luks felt an increase in self-esteem after helping out.

As executive director of the Mental Health America of Arizona, Charles Jepson wholeheartedly agrees. MHAAZ works on behalf of those living with mental illness and provides various opportunities for volunteers to get involved. Most of the volunteers at MHAAZ have mental illnesses themselves and facilitate peer support groups. "These facilitators have a rise in self-esteem knowing they are helping other people," Jepson says.

Now meet Tamara Milke, who, prior to volunteering at MHAAZ was in recovery for a mental disorder and co-occurring illness. After a few short months, it became clear that giving back was just what Milke needed to regain her confidence and happiness. "In seven months of working with MHA Arizona, I have gone from lying under my bed on the 4th of July, terrified to come out, afraid of everyone, to working full time and feeling good about myself and what my abilities are and not giving up on myself," Milke says.

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"Each time she came in, we could see a real difference," says Beth Summers, MHA AZ executive assistant and manager of volunteer services. "[There was such] a difference in her confidence, and the way she dressed and the way she combed her hair...she just started blossoming again, and she said it just brought her out of her shell."

"She was awarded our Bill Haase Annual Volunteer Award because of what she brought to our office and because of the example she was," says Suzan Manning, MHA AZ advocacy and referral administrator. Milke now works a full-time job and is managing anxiety.

Everyday Deeds

Sure, volunteering for a cause is a great way to feel that heavenly helper's high, but what about your everyday, random acts of kindness? The Corporation for National and Community Service reports that in addition to the 60.8 million nationwide volunteers committed to organizations, about 5.2 million also help out informally in their communities. Stephanie Brown, assistant professor in the department of internal medicine at the University of Michigan, has conducted studies determining the effects that giving has on the giver. She has studied practical ways of helping, like childcare and transportation, as well as emotional ways, like being willing to listen to a friend in need. "People who report higher levels of helping [others] have a lower mortality risk than people who report lower levels of helping people," she says.

If you don't notice an immediate spike in your physical health after giving back, you most certainly will notice a change in the way you feel emotionally. Although her studies have not confirmed why this happens, Brown also points out that the helper tends to experience better moods and well-being. Helping produces positive emotions, which act as powerful stress buffers. The reduction of stress can eventually lead to decreased risk for cardiovascular disease.

"People that give are happier people; they're healthier, happier people," Ashcraft says.

Illness Be Gone

Less stress and feelings of joy, of course, but can these seemingly simple effects give us a clean bill of health at our next doctor's appointment? It's possible.

Luks reports that many people who gave back experienced fewer headaches and backaches as well as help with weight control, sleeplessness, infections, stomach acid, arthritis, lupus, asthma and coronary heart disease. Many of these symptoms are initially caused by stress and even loneliness. When individuals begin spending time helping others in their community, stress levels drop, and so do many symptoms of illness.

Who Benefits?

Whether helping out in the community is an after-school activity or a way to spend your retired days, it's clear that such giving can be a gift for the giver as well as the recipient. However, older individuals may have even more health-related incentives than younger volunteers. The Corporation for National & Community Service says that those participating in volunteer activities as a part of other responsibilities, like parenting, may not experience the same health benefits as older volunteers who do so for personal fulfillment and interest.

Also, while individuals facing mid-life depression are likely to steer clear of volunteer opportunities, those ages 60 and up are expected to use their despair as a starting point for finding ways to get involved.

To further ascertain the health-promoting qualities of giving back for older adults, 128 individuals ages 60 to 86 participated in a 2004 Johns Hopkins Medicine study. The group joined Experience Corps, an award-winning program that places older adults in a position to mentor and tutor children. Their health was then measured. Of the individuals who participated, 44 percent felt stronger after the two-year trial; and most experienced an increase in physical, cognitive and social activity as well.

Spread the Wealth

Whether you have the time, the money, the talent or just a few minutes to spare, the results are clear: When you make others happy, you become happy.

"It's those small acts of kindness [that matter]. Get engaged and do something," Ashcraft says. "One healthy barometer of a community is a healthy philanthropic impulse."

Giving and receiving: what a perfect combo for the season.