


the power of giving back

Searching for greater contentment? Clinical psychologist Cassandra Dunn explains how putting our hands up to help others can help us live happier, healthier and more connected lives.

words CASSANDRA DUNN





In a world that works hard to convince us happiness comes in the form of more money, success or status, sometimes it's necessary to pause and ask ourselves if that's really where we'll find the deeper meaning that gives our lives substance. Living a 'good' life involves more than feeling good – it involves working towards intrinsically motivating goals and having a sense that your life has a purpose beyond attaining external markers of wealth and success.

Doing meaningful work is proven to enhance well-being, but sometimes we overlook the meaning that can be found in unpaid work. Volunteering your time to support a cause that matters to you offers physical, psychological and cognitive benefits, and while much of the literature refers to benefits for older people and retirees, there's no need to wait until you reach retirement to start reaping the benefits. There's evidence that children who witness their parents volunteering are more likely to become volunteers themselves; and in fact, children who volunteer are more likely to develop the 'habit of service' and go on to become lifelong volunteers.

Whether you feel strongly about animal welfare, refugees, domestic violence, children or homeless people, there is an organisation that would welcome your support. You don't have to only look locally either. Volunteering holidays run by social enterprises offer exciting opportunities to experience a different culture while also making a difference to the local community. If you're in any doubt about the potential of volunteering to increase your sense of satisfaction with life, just consider some of these proven benefits...

It's good for your health

A Harvard School of Public Health study found that people who volunteered regularly were less likely to develop high blood pressure. It also found that volunteers are more likely to seek preventative healthcare, possibly due to the known links between optimism (which people gain from volunteering) and proactive health behaviours.

It will boost your mood

Doing good makes you feel good! Forming social connections, gaining a sense of purpose and being physically active are all known to reduce depression, stress and anxiety and enhance subjective wellbeing. When you give your time in support of people who may be worse off than you are, you also have the opportunity to gain a sense of perspective about your own troubles – so if you're feeling low, there's no better way to get a lift than to give back to someone in need.

Volunteering your time to support a cause that matters to you offers physical, psychological and cognitive benefits.

It builds skills

Whether you give your time to a charity or decide to join the committee of your children's school or sports club, there's a chance you'll be asked to do something you haven't done before – and since there's an expectation that everyone's learning 'on the job', you have the opportunity to build those skills without the pressure to perform that you might feel in a paid work environment. Some of those skills are invaluable in the workplace and might even open up new employment opportunities.

It's great for forming new connections

If you're new to an area, there's no better way to meet like-minded people than to volunteer for a cause that matters to you. We now know that loneliness is as toxic to your health as cigarette smoking, so finding ways to cultivate a sense of community is essential to health and even longevity.

It enhances your self-esteem

When you offer something of yourself in the service of others, you gain a sense of being a good person. This is partly why research has demonstrated that performing acts of kindness is of as much benefit to the giver as the receiver. Not only that, but choosing a charity or cause that matters to you helps you define your values. Knowing what you stand for and then actively participating in events that align with those values is the very definition of living a good life and of cultivating a view of yourself as a good person. ☺