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Volunteering Does

Good Things Happen to Good People

Stephen Post, coauthor of

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sociology at Stony Brook Univer-

sity. All the while, she says, reaching out to others has improved her

emotional benefits, including less stress and depression, and

chronic condition. And volunteers were more likely to report

out of your challenge by helping others through theirs.”

Not all who volunteer, of course, will experience the so-
called helper’s high. A study published in the Gerontologist
in March suggests volunteers benefit most when programs
provide strong "organizational support." That translates to
volunteers finding their work interesting, feeling that they’re
being used effectively, and receiving positive feedback. "Having
a practical, optimal opportunity makes a difference," Post says.

The bottom line? It’s good to be good. “Try to be gener-
ous and kind and helpful to people and you’re going to be
shielded from a number of stress-related illnesses," Post says.
“And odds are, you’re going to live a little longer.”

a greater sense of well-being—and of purpose and meaning in
their lives—than nonvolunteers.

Lending a hand can lessen pain and boost functional abili-
ties, like walking and doing heavy work around the house, ac-
cording to a Corporation for National and Community Service
report. High levels of oxytocin decrease stress, which in turn
helps ward off illness and keeps the body healthy, Post says.
Volunteering also elevates levels of the body’s natural opiates,
like endorphins, or “happy hormones,” and dopamine.

For older adults prone to social isolation, volunteering
offers enhanced social networks and a way to stay active in
the community—and, with that, a sense of belonging. It also
can improve volunteers’ perception of their own competence.
People who help others tend to live longer: “Helping is
an independent, unique predictor of reduced risk of mortality,” says
psychologist Stephanie Brown of the Institute for Social Research
at the University of Michigan.

“There’s a very reliable association.” Brown followed more than
400 elderly couples for five years, and found that people who provided
hands-on support were half as likely to die over the study period as
nonvolunteers—even when adjusting for factors like baseline health,
mental health, and age.

Ellison spends much of her time these days giving inspirational
speeches and working one-on-one with people who need help. She says
she was frank and upfront when she met recently with a teenager who
had suffered an extensive spinal cord injury and was refusing to eat
or speak with her family. “I’ve be-
come very sensitive to the struggles
people face, and people have become
very open to sharing their lives with
me,” she says. “I’ve learned that you can only make meaning
out of your challenge by helping others through theirs.”

Researchers say that
people who help others
tend to live longer.

A variety of studies over the years suggest that, no matter
where they begin healthwise, volunteers reap physical and
emotional benefits, including less stress and depression, and
longer lives. Volunteering is particularly beneficial to adults
65 and older and those who serve more than 100 hours each
year. In a survey of more than 4,500 adults released in April
by UnitedHealthcare and VolunteerMatch, 68 percent said
they felt better physically since they started volunteering;
29 percent said giving back was helping them to manage a
chronic condition. And volunteers were more likely to report

Volunteering Does a Body Good

For the heart and the spirit, experts say, give a little and you will get a lot back

By Angela Haupt

Brooke Ellison could have been bitter, rendered a
quadriplegic at age 11 when she was struck by a
car while walking home from her first day of ju-
nior high. Instead, she’s living a fuller life than she
could have imagined when doctors told her she’d
never walk again. The secret, says Ellison, 31, of Stony Brook,
N.Y., is helping others cope with their own life-altering chal-
lenges. “My mother tells me it makes me glow, and I feel it. I
feel invigorated,” she says. “Where I’ve gotten over the past
20 years—and my ability to continue moving forward, living
my life as fully as possible—is a direct result of what I feel I
can give to other people.”

And she has gotten far: Ellison graduated from Harvard with a
bachelor’s degree in cognitive neuroscience in 2000 and a master’s
in public policy in 2004. That year, The Brooke Ellison Story, directed
by Christopher Reeve, premiered on the cable channel A&E. Today,
Ellison is pursuing a doctorate in sociology at Stony Brook University.
All the while, she says, reaching out to others has improved her
own well-being, which researchers say is no surprise.

Why volunteering makes us healthier is rooted in biology, says
Stephen Post, coauthor of Why Good Things Happen to Good People
(2007) and director of the Center for Medical Humanities, Compa-
nionate Care, and Bioethics at Stony Brook University. “One of the best
ways to get your mind off your aches and pains is to get your mind on
somebody else,” he says. “This is a new science, but it does seem that
we involve the brain, we involve the immune system, and we
probably involve certain hormones, like oxytocin—the com-
passion hormone.”

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