

Volunteering for Happiness and Health

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Why Do People Volunteer?

Being happy plays an important role in health and many people find happiness in volunteering. Dr. Albert Schweitzer once said: *'the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve'*. A study done by Argyle in 1996 identified volunteering as the second greatest source of joy. Dancing was first.¹

Many people worldwide participate in volunteer work. In America, more young people volunteer than vote, and in Australia, approximately 4.4 million people contribute around 701 million hours of their time per year in volunteering.² (In W.A. alone, surf life saving volunteers spend about 60,000 hours patrolling beaches each year.³) Volunteering is estimated to be worth more than \$10 billion to the Australian economy.²

Reasons people decide to volunteer include:

- wanting to help people;
- to improve conditions in society/environment;
- to meet people;
- to pass the time;
- for enjoyment/ fun;
- to keep active;
- to increase skills; and
- to improve chances of getting paid employment.

The reasons people volunteer vary but the most common reason across all age groups is 'to improve society and environment'.⁴ While self-development possibilities are usually more important to younger people than to older adults, volunteering can bring direct and indirect benefits to a community and help to improve social and economic conditions⁵.

Benefits of Volunteering

Volunteering is often seen in terms of the benefits volunteers bring to those they help but more recently many have become aware of the benefits to the volunteers themselves.

Volunteers may benefit economically from their volunteer work. Lonsdale's research indicates that 'volunteering is a way of gaining new skills to step into paid work'.⁶ The Australian Prime Minister recently agreed to consider a plan that involves paying retired volunteers for their efforts and giving tax breaks to volunteers still in the workforce.⁷

Volunteering also has other positive effects including better physical health and enhanced social skills. For example, volunteering for environmental causes via outdoor work can provide individuals the recommended daily

amount of physical activity.⁸ An inverse relationship between numbers of hours spent volunteering and number of times visiting a doctor also indicates that there may be health benefits to volunteering for older people.⁹

Further, volunteering can be a way to bring families closer together, by providing a common goal for all family members and the opportunity to spend quality time together. Singles may find love through volunteering. Some people have found their current partners through volunteering.²

Volunteering and Mental Health

Volunteer work can also improve volunteers' mental health. Volunteer work can lead to improved access to psychological and social resources. These resources are known to counter negative moods such as anxiety and depression. Studies have found that 61% of people who volunteer at least 5 times a year say volunteer work helps them feel less stressed.¹⁰

Prolonged contact to volunteering benefits all populations. Studies show that for those over 65, volunteering can lower depression levels.

In the elderly, volunteering on religious grounds is more beneficial than volunteering for secular reasons.¹¹

Recent research on the benefits of volunteering amongst older adults has also found that those who participate in additional hours of volunteering report their well-being to be at higher levels, while the type and number of organisations with whom they volunteer have no effect. These benefits were not limited to race, gender, or social integration¹².

Other studies addressing social benefits and relationships that may exist between depression and volunteer work have shown formal volunteering presents a 'beneficial effect on depressive symptoms'.¹³ Researcher Carolyn Schwartz found that people who made others feel cared about report better mental health than the people they were helping.¹⁴

Volunteering has also been used as recovery therapy for those with disabilities.¹⁵ Programs currently running provide volunteer opportunities for those living with a mental condition. Volunteering also presents a compensation effect for those with depressive symptoms as people with depression sometimes look to volunteering as a way to help their mental health.¹³

Volunteering May Make You Happy

A number of studies and numerous individual testimonies clearly indicate that volunteer

work has immense benefits for many individuals. There is a vast range of volunteer programs available and many opportunities for a diverse number of individuals to participate.

There are various reasons why volunteering may make individuals happy. Some people may just enjoy helping others. Some feel good that they have set a goal and achieved it through their volunteer work, and others may find their volunteer work useful for their own future endeavours. So, if you want to be happy try volunteering.

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