

HEALTH UPDATE

LIVE FOR LIFE®

Help Yourself by Helping Others

Many of us exercise and eat well to stay healthy. However, helping others may be just as important for our mental and physical well-being.

Over three thousand volunteers were surveyed across the country. Nearly all said that helping others regularly gives them a "helper's high" – a sudden warmth, a surge of energy, and a feeling of euphoria. This is often followed by a longer-lasting period of increased self-worth, calm, and relaxation. Also, many people reported fewer colds, headaches, and backaches; improved eating and sleeping habits; and even relief from the pain of chronic diseases such as ulcers, asthma, arthritis, and lupus.

Another study of 2,700 men in Michigan showed that those who volunteered for community groups were two and a half times less likely to die from all causes of disease than men who did not!

How do charity, generosity, and service help us? When we focus on the distress of others, we expand our outlook. Maybe this helps us appreciate what we do have. Also, it's hard to pay attention to several things at once. While concentrating on others we forget ourselves and our health problems.

Here are some ideas for getting the most out of volunteering:

- Choose activities requiring personal contact. Try tutoring, reading to the blind, or visiting the elderly. "Hands

on" tasks like these appear to be the best for the helper in terms of the "helper's high," increased self-esteem, and reduced stress.

- Volunteer as often as you can. Of course, don't neglect your other obligations. In one survey, those who volunteered once a week were ten times more likely to report good health than those who were once-a-year helpers.
- When possible, volunteer from free choice rather than a sense of obligation. "Forced" helping, such as taking care of a loved one who is ill, can become a burden. This may result in increased stress and illness.
- Consider volunteering through an organization. You'll experience teamwork and connection. Also, you'll be more likely to volunteer regularly. There's an organization for almost every interest.
- Allow the person you're helping to make decisions and assume responsibility. Try not to protect another person from all problems or bad news. Sometimes it's better not to help. You will actually empower others by encouraging independence.
- Have a healthy attitude. Remember that one person cannot single-handedly wipe out poverty and illness. We cannot always measure the results of our actions, but that doesn't mean we haven't made a difference.

- Practice random acts of kindness. Look for chances to give without expecting something in return.

If you decide to try volunteer work, ease into it slowly and watch for signs of burnout. If done sensibly, it can be a great way to promote your health or cope with a personal health problem.

In order to find a volunteer program that's right for you, check with voluntary organizations, houses of worship, hospitals, schools, nursing/eldercare homes, museums, YMCAs, the United Way, or look in the white or yellow pages under your area of interest or under "volunteer." Contact Volunteer – The National Center, 1111 North 19th Street; Arlington, VA 22209; 703-276-0542.

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