



# MONEY Personal Finance

## Why Helping Others Makes Us Happy

Pursuing self-interested goals drives ongoing community engagement and raises self-esteem

By PHILIP MOELLER

April 4, 2012

*The following article comes from the U.S. News ebook, [How to Live to 100](#), which is now available for purchase.*

Helping our fellow man has long been seen as an altruistic behavioral model. But it turns out that more selfish motives—pleasing friends, doing what you want—are more successful causes of effective volunteering. Whatever the motive, volunteering improves the health, happiness, and in some cases, the longevity of volunteers. Children who volunteer are more likely to grow up to be adults who volunteer. Even unwilling children who are forced to volunteer fare better than kids who don't volunteer. And in a virtuous circle, communities with lots of volunteers are more stable and better places to live, which in turn further boosts volunteerism.

[See the [Top 10 U.S. Cities for Well-Being](#).]

"On one hand, it's striking that volunteering even occurs," says Mark Snyder, a psychologist and head of the Center for the Study of the Individual and Society at the University of Minnesota. "It seems to run against the strong dynamics of self-interest. There is simply nothing in society that says that someone is mandated to help anyone else." Yet 1 in 3 adults do meaningful volunteer work on a sustained basis, he notes, and the United States has one of the world's highest rates of volunteerism.

"People who volunteer tend to have higher self-esteem, psychological well-being, and happiness," Snyder says. "All of these things go up as their feelings of social connectedness goes up, which in reality, it does. It also improves their health and even their longevity."

Among teenagers, even at-risk children who volunteer reap big benefits, according to research findings studied by Jane Allyn Piliavin, a retired University of Wisconsin sociologist. She cites a positive effect on grades, self-concept, and attitudes toward education. Volunteering also led to reduced drug use and huge declines in dropout rates and teen pregnancies.

Other research links youth volunteering to a higher quality of life as an adult, Piliavin adds. "Participating in high school tends to boost participating in adulthood, which is related to enhanced well-being." One clear message from this for parents: Get your children involved in community volunteer programs.

Most people say they value volunteering because it's "the right thing to do," among other altruistic reasons. But the strongest drivers of successful volunteers are actually more self-focused, notes Allen Omoto, a professor of psychology at Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, Calif. There are five main reasons people volunteer, he says.

Three are "self-focused":

1. Understanding: the desire to learn new things and acquire knowledge.
2. Esteem enhancement: feeling better about yourself and finding greater stability in life.
3. Personal development: acquiring new skills, testing your capabilities, and stretching yourself.

Two are "other-focused":

4. Sense of community: making the world, or your piece of it, better.
5. Humanitarian values: serving and helping others, often with a strong religious component.

"The ones that get the higher rates of endorsement are the 'other focused' ones," Omoto says. "But it's the 'self-focused' ones that predict length of service." Snyder also says people who don't volunteer often have an idealized view of people who do. "They put them up on a pedestal," he says. This might actually deter people from volunteering because they feel they don't measure up.

The benefits of volunteering are linked to a person's degree of commitment. "It's clear that more is better, at least up a point," Piliavin says. "Some studies find an inflection point and others don't. One study finds the benefits increase up to the point where a person has volunteered 100 hours during a year." Consistency is also important. "The more consistently you do it, the better your psychology benefits," she says.

[See [The Secret to a Long and Happy Life](#).]

Snyder says the amount of volunteering people do tends to rise steadily during their adult years and begins declining at about the age of 60. Interestingly, the benefits of volunteering rise for older people, and experts say they might benefit from more volunteer work, not less.

Linda Fried, a professor of public health at Columbia University Medical Center, says increased longevity raises the need to find engaging activities in our later years. "We've added 30 years to human life expectancy in this country over the past 100 years," she says. "What will it take to keep people healthy and happy in these longer lives? Well, there is actually a burgeoning amount of evidence that there are a number of factors."

"One of them is staying physically active and one of them is staying socially active," she says. Volunteering helps achieve both goals. The social networks of people tend to decline as they age; family and friends move away or die. Volunteering can replace these ties and their well-being and happiness benefits.

"The other thing that is really important to people, particularly as they get older, is that they feel they've made a difference being on the planet," Fried says. "That's a deeply personal sense of meaning, particularly as people take stock of their lives as they get older."

In her medical practice with older people, Fried discovered that there was a lack of volunteer opportunities for them that could provide a good combination of these benefits. "I realized there was a dearth of roles for older adults in our society ... where they could make a difference." She acted on her perception and co-founded Experience Corps, which has evolved into a highly acclaimed volunteer model for older people who mentor younger school-age children in at-risk communities.

Now in more than 20 cities, Experience Corps provides training and financial stipends to its volunteers. Their mentoring activities are also structured to produce tangible educational and social benefits to children. It can be challenging work, but the resulting outcomes provide mentors with a meaningful benefit. At the same time, volunteers also derive social networking benefits.

[See [Do Rich People Live Longer?](#)]

People often get into volunteer work because a friend asks them, and that can be a fine entry point. But people should also do some work to make sure the organization is a good fit for their interests and that the work they would be doing is also a good fit, says Omoto. "What's the optimal match for me?" is a question to ask, he says.

Further, if there is a jumble of factors motivating people to consider volunteering, they might want to reconsider. "When people have multiple motivations, it is harder for them to be satisfied," Omoto says. "It is easier to derive happiness when your goals are simpler."

"Concern for others and concern for yourself can complement one another," Snyder says. "Find a way to do good for others at the same time as you do good for yourself," he advises. "Make volunteering a part of your social life and embed it in your social network."

**Corrected on 4/5/2012:** A previous version of this story incorrectly misspelled Allen Omoto's last name.

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