

A person wearing a white, textured robe is shown from the chest down to the hands. Their hands are held out in front of them, palms up, in a gesture of offering or giving. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color. The text is centered over the person's torso.

what you get
from giving

The reasons for giving vary as much as the people who do it. Compassion, duty, love, guilt—all these motives prompt us to share our time, our money, and our energy. But new research has revealed a surprising fact about what we get in return, whether we're supporting disaster relief or giving Grandma a hand with the groceries. In what can only be considered a blissful karmic payoff, it's more often the giver—not the receiver—who reaps the biggest payback.

The take-away, say scientists, amounts to much more than a passing feel-good moment: It's literally your health that stands to gain. In one study of 2,000 people conducted at the Buck Institute for Age Research in Novato, California, those who volunteered for two or more organizations had a whopping 44 percent lower likelihood of dying compared with those who didn't—and that's after adjusting for other factors such as health, exercise, and marital status. Volunteering even beat out exercising four times a week (30 percent) and going to religious services (29 percent) when it came to promoting longevity. Another study of 427 women found that those who did any kind of volunteering had better physical functioning 30 years later. Next to quitting smoking, giving is the best possible thing you could do for your health—making virtue truly its own reward.

How does this work? The reasons behind the giver-receiver relationship are unclear, but as recent research published in *Molecular Psychiatry* suggests, “nurturing others may feel good because it is rewarded by spikes of dopamine”—the neurotransmitter linked to cravings, pleasure, and reward. But it almost doesn't matter whether we have “helper's high” or some other factor to thank. “If you want a better life, better health, and the sense of being connected and hopeful in this world, the answer is to give,” says bioethicist Stephen Post, Ph.D., coauthor (with Jill Neimark) of *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*.

Regular exercise and a low-fat diet are the best way to better health, right? Not exactly. The simple act of giving actually benefits you more than anything else

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELIZABETH WATT

Give a little every single day, and you'll live a happier, healthier, and longer life.

It all starts with small, consistent acts performed with consciousness and intention—not quitting your job to join the Peace Corps (but go ahead if you're so inclined). As you'll discover in the following pages, altruism takes countless forms, even ones you'd never expect. Use these inspirations to start making generosity a part of every day, whether it's leaving a big tip or listening to a friend. You'll better align your actions with your values, get more spiritually grounded, and deepen your relationships with the people around you. Simply put, says Post, “Give a little every single day, and you'll live a happier, healthier, and longer life.”

Think Outside Yourself

Many of us would give more than we do—if we didn't feel so boxed into certain roles. These self-images (mother, teacher, bank executive) can limit our view of what we can contribute. We think, “Why ladle soup for the homeless when finance is my strength?” Or, “That's not my job, that's someone else's.” But often the best help we can give is to simply fill a need, whatever it may be.

Gary Morsch, M.D., coauthor of *The Power of Serving Others* (with Dean Nelson) discovered this firsthand back in 1996. He'd arrived in Calcutta, India, with 90 volunteers and \$12 million worth of medicine to work alongside Mother Teresa and the Sisters of Charity. But instead of being put to work immediately to aid the sick and dying, he was led to a fetid pile of trash, handed two buckets and a shovel, and told to take the garbage to the dump. Surely they were mistaken, he thought. (After all, he was a *doctor*!) It wasn't until later that the sign inside the shelter, lettered in Mother Teresa's own hand, struck him: “We can do no great things, only small things with great love.” The lesson, says

Morsch, remains with him to this day: “I discovered that true service isn't about what I have to offer or who I am. It's about being available, willing, and open to those in need.”

Give it a try Think about all the labels you use to define and describe who you are. How may the way you see yourself be limiting your capacity to give where you're needed most? Consider a few people, organizations, or events that could use your help, regardless of your skill set. Let the needs and the people you encounter dictate the best way to give, whether it's a friend who could use some emotional support or a colleague who needs a lift. You might even discover gifts you didn't realize you had.

Be Happy for Someone Else

One of the most generous things you can do for the world (and often the most difficult) is to share sympathetic joy, or true happiness for someone else's good fortune. As Insight Meditation Society founder and *Lovingkindness* author Sharon Salzberg explains, “There's this inherent fear we have that if someone else is happy, there's less happiness left in the world for us. But it's not true.” This kind of fear, she says, closes us off and has a kind of “stuck” quality to it. True generosity, on the other hand, is fluid and yielding. “The challenge lies in letting that spirit of generosity open you so that you can give yourself over.”

Give it a try Next time you get word of a colleague's promotion or a friend's sudden windfall, counter that fear of “not enough” with joy. Rather than imagine that there's less left for you, think the opposite: There's more to be had as a result. In your shared joy, you welcome greater abundance. Celebrate in a friend's news, and you may find that good fortune and energy rubbing off on you.



50 Ways to Give Right Now

Donate blood. Say a prayer for someone who's hurting.

Smile at a stranger.

Hold the door.

Give up your seat. Participate in a race that benefits a charity.

Send a thank-you card to someone who's shown you kindness.

Let go of an old grudge. Stay calm during a stressful time.

Mentor a colleague who's new to your field.

Throw a party for someone celebrating a milestone.

Next time you're ready to honk at another car, don't.

Surprise someone.

Give directions to someone who's lost.

Give a compliment.

Write a letter to a person who's made a difference in your life.

Plant a tree. Tell your mom you love her.

Elect to be an organ donor. Make a donation, however small, to your favorite charity.

Extend a warm welcome to a newcomer.

Put yourself in another person's shoes.

Reduce, reuse, recycle.

Become a Big Brother or Big Sister.

Spend time with an elderly person.

Praise someone who's done well.

Tell a joke.

Help a fellow traveler with her luggage.

Let your spouse sleep late.

Kick bad habits, like smoking, that can harm others.

Pass on good news.

Give your full attention.

Applaud a great performance.

Forgive yourself.

Offer a ride to somebody without a car.

Laugh. Buy a meal for someone who's hungry.

Lead by example.

Call a friend you haven't heard from in a while.

Confront a friend who needs confronting.

Help a younger person discover a hidden talent.

Look cashiers in the eye. Thank the bank teller.

Invite someone who's not a part of your inner circle to a friendly gathering.

Raise money for a cause you believe in.

Teach your children about giving.

Pay the toll for the person behind you.

Leave a big tip when you eat out.

When you see trash, pick it up.

Spearhead a petition.

Rescue an animal from a shelter.

—Deblina Chakraborty



Give What You Need

At first glance, this advice doesn't make sense: If you needed something, how could you possibly have it to give away? Therein lies the whole point—and the magic—behind giving. A study published in *Social Science & Medicine* examined the effect of generosity on the well-being of the giver. People living with multiple sclerosis were trained to listen and provide support to others with MS. Researchers found that those giving the peer support showed markedly improved levels of confidence, self-esteem, and mood as compared to those on the receiving end. (Another study found similar results with Alcoholics Anonymous members. Those who helped other alcoholics were significantly less likely to go back to drinking in that critical first year than those who didn't help.) "Often, we help others to overcome precisely the problems that beset our own lives," says Post.

That's not to say that giving from a place of need is easy—which is why we have to practice. "You might decide to give someone something," notes Salzberg, "but then a clenching fear arises that you'll need it, that you don't have enough of it to give away. The key is awareness of that fear, and giving in spite of it. That's what makes altruism a practice. It's not about succeeding or failing; it's about learning the nature of generosity."

Give it a try Rather than view yourself as bereft and in need of things from others, see yourself as the giver of those things, and you'll be surprised at what happens. Think about what you'd like more of in your life. More friends? Make it a point to be there for someone in need; write a letter to an old pal with whom you've lost touch. More parties? Throw one of your own. More laughter? Share a joke or a funny story—and you'll be laughing, too.

Use the News

Listen to the doom-and-gloom of the nightly news and it's easy to wonder, "What can I do—and what difference would it make anyway?" But our response to the news media is a choice that's under our control, says Morsch. "We have to start seeing the events and situations unfolding around us as opportunities to help, not problems to fix."

Morsch, who founded the nonprofit Heart to Heart International, and who has worked in some of the most disaster-stricken corners of the world, warns against focusing on the problems in their totality. "The goal of working in a soup kitchen isn't necessarily to end all hunger forever; it's to feed a hungry person that day. You can change the world with the next person you encounter by being a positive force and a blessing to them."

Give it a try Every disaster or crime you hear about is not yet another sign that the world is beyond saving. Start seeing the news differently. Watch with a different perspective, using the information as a guide to where help is most needed. Knowing the facts will help you discern how to use your resources, whether it's providing funds, giving your time, or starting a letter-writing campaign.

Reach Beyond Your Circle

Chances are, you give most to the people closest to you. While this might be where giving starts, says Post, it isn't where it should end. "If the only people we help in our lives are our nearest and dearest, we're missing the point. We need to strike a balance between giving to those we know and those we don't. That's the challenge—and the virtue—of generosity." By widening your scope, you send a message that the rest of the world matters. Social entrepreneur Adam Hirschfelder has a sug-

Showing generosity goes beyond just being nice to others; it means empowering them with a sense of value.

gestion for those ready to branch out: volunteer. Inspired by research showing the health benefits of older adults who participate in volunteer work, he created the Public Health Institute's Rx: Volunteer project, one of the first national efforts to promote volunteerism and civic engagement among older adults in health-care settings. "The helper's high is more than just anecdotal evidence," he says. "We now know that volunteering has a powerful impact on the duration and quality of life."

Give it a try Find your volunteer niche. "Ask yourself what group or cause you'd like to benefit. It should be something you enjoy, not some chore you agree to," says Hirschfelder. What groups do you like working with—teenagers, the elderly? Do you want to be making calls, gathering signatures, lending an ear, serving on the board? "Get involved with an organization in a way that excites you—not only to help others, but to connect with your community." Visit volunteermatch.org to browse ideas and opportunities in your area.

Pass the Torch

Showing generosity toward others goes beyond just being nice; it means empowering them with a sense of value. In this way, giving to another person is akin to teaching a man to fish, as the saying goes. "You can also think of an act of kindness as a pebble thrown into a lake," says Morsch. "The ripples continue to expand outward. Kindness precedes us, and it lives after us as well." When you teach someone a new skill or technique, encourage her to pursue a dream, or praise her contributions, you enable her to be a better giver, too.

Give it a try Who in your world could benefit from your attention and time? Think of people you know starting out in your profession who would like to

learn the ropes or could use some encouragement. Find ways to give to others that enable them to be the best person they can be.

Give All Day, Everywhere

It's a classic case in irony: The do-gooder spends all day advocating for worker's wages, only to stiff his waiter a tip at dinner. "It happens to all of us," says Post. "We get out of the flow of generosity, and before we know it, impatience or frustration sets us back a few paces." It even happens to Post himself on occasion: He may be president of the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love, but Post admits he has been known (albeit rarely) to lean on his horn when the car in front of him doesn't move fast enough through a yellow light.

Look at your daily interactions as countless opportunities for generosity. You can be deeply moved by injustices and disasters all over the world, but the minute you snap at a Starbucks barista, you've lost some integrity. For Post, being consistently generous depends on an alignment between thoughts and actions—something he's getting better at. "I have a good rapport with the folks at the laundromat, and it makes a difference."

Give it a try Where does your generous spirit tend to fall between the cracks? At work? At the bank? Try making a special effort to give attention and kindness to all the people you interact with, whether you know them or not. Notice how it changes your experience, your mood, and the way people respond to you. Salzberg suggests using a simple mantra to help you stay present to the people you meet, such as: *May you be happy, may you be peaceful.* "This helps you channel your attention toward someone, rather than allowing your judgments or indifference to pull you away," she says.

