

Feeling Good

HEALTH NEWS, DECODED: THE WRITING REMEDY

The Do- Gooder's Guide to Better Health

How helping others helps you. *By Leslie Goldman*



Streetter

AS A BOY, WHENEVER Stephen Post got a bad grade, or felt left out of his older brother and sister's games, or was otherwise having a rough day, his mother always said, "Why don't you go out and do something for someone else?" At which point he'd head next door to rake Mr. Mueller's leaves or go across the street to help Mr. Lawrence with his boat. "I always came home feeling better," says Post, now a professor of preventive medicine at Stony Brook University School of Medicine and author of *The Hidden Gifts of Helping*. Turns out, there was science behind his mom's kitchen-table wisdom: Practicing philanthropy is one of the surest steps you can take toward a happy, healthy life. Here's why.

LONGER LIFESPAN

A 2013 review of 40 international studies suggests that volunteering can add years to your life—with some evidence pointing to a 22 percent reduction in mortality. How much time must you spare? A separate study found that seniors who gave 100 hours or more annually were 28 percent less likely to die from any cause than their less-philanthropic counterparts. "But that's not a magic number—it could be 75 hours or 125," says study coauthor Elizabeth Lightfoot, PhD, an associate professor at the University of Minnesota School of Social Work. "The important thing is that you're doing it regularly." And you needn't be older to benefit. A new study in *JAMA Pediatrics* found that high school students saw a drop in their cholesterol levels after volunteering with younger kids once a week for two months.

GREATER HAPPINESS

When you read to the elderly, walk a 5K for cancer, or even plunk a quarter in the Salvation Army kettle, the reward center of your brain pumps out the mood-elevating neurotransmitter dopamine, creating what researchers call a helper's high. In fact, one study found that people who completed five small acts of kindness (like helping a friend, visiting a relative, or writing a thank-you



note) one day a week for six weeks experienced a significant boost in overall feelings of well-being. Interestingly, those who spread their goodwill over the course of a week showed no such boost. "Our research suggests there's a threshold of giving that you need to reach before it has an impact," says study coauthor Sonja Lyubomirsky, PhD, a psychology professor at the University of California, Riverside. "Each action has a cumulative effect. The more nice things you do, the more people will respond positively toward you, and the better you'll feel."

BETTER PAIN MANAGEMENT

When chronic-pain sufferers helped others with the same ailment, they reported feeling less discomfort, according to a study in *Pain Management Nursing*. On a scale of 0 to 10, people's average pain ratings dropped from nearly a 6 to below 4 after volunteer training and six months of leading discussion groups for pain sufferers or making weekly calls to check in on patients. "People living with chronic pain can often feel helpless about their condition, but recognizing the positive effect they had on others in the same situation gave them a sense of purpose," says study coauthor Paul Arnstein, PhD, a clinical nurse specialist for pain relief at

Massachusetts General Hospital. "In turn, that gave them more confidence to find ways of managing their own discomfort." This kind of volunteering can work with other conditions, too: A study in the journal *Social Science & Medicine* found that after individuals living with multiple sclerosis offered emotional support to other MS sufferers via monthly phone calls, the helpers were less prone to depression and anxiety.

LOWER BLOOD PRESSURE

A 2013 study in the journal *Psychology and Aging* revealed that adults over the age of 50 who reported volunteering at least 200 hours in the past year (roughly four hours per week) were 40 percent less likely than nonvolunteers to have developed hypertension four years later. Though researchers don't fully understand why giving back can have such a marked impact on blood pressure, they believe it may be linked to the stress-reducing effects of being both active and altruistic. "As we get older, our social networks shrink," says study coauthor Rodlescia Sneed. "Volunteering may offer an opportunity to establish more social connections and form new bonds with people who care about you and motivate you to take care of yourself." **Q**