



THE JOY OF GIVING

Volunteering allows you the chance to be part of something bigger than yourself. The rewards of that are plentiful, not the least of which are health benefits. Volunteer *Diana Ballon* shares her insights.

THERE ARE DAYS WHERE I SIT ALONE IN MY OFFICE AND feel like I am having an existential crisis. Although I trained as a clinical social worker and a journalist, I ended up working as a writer and editor, and I miss connecting with people outside of my four walls. At no other time is that feeling more powerful than during the holidays, with its frenzy of gift buying and preoccupation with “things.”

A few years ago, I discovered that a perfect antidote to that sense of disengagement is to volunteer. One Christmas, I helped serve a holiday meal at a short-term residential crisis centre in downtown Toronto. Since then, I’ve also volunteered at a local soup kitchen. It’s hard to describe the effect volunteering has on me, but I just feel better.

Little did I know there’s research that confirms the health benefits of volunteering. These include everything from reducing stress and depression, to lowering blood pressure and even living longer, says Bill Koch, a clinical professor in the department of psychiatry at the University of British Columbia, a clinical and forensic psychologist and a committed volunteer himself.

It’s hard to know exactly how volunteering influences people’s well-being — whether it’s healthier, more active people who tend to volunteer or whether the work itself produces that effect.

My experiences certainly reflect what Paula Speevak, president and CEO of Volunteer Canada, refers to when she says volunteering is about a reciprocal relationship. “We have moved away from [patronizing] terms like ‘less fortunate’ and toward the concept of mutual aid,” says Speevak. “Everyone has something to give, and the notion of volunteering now has more to do with actively participating or engaging with the community than simply serving people.”

“The primary reason for volunteering is to help others, but volunteering benefits people in all different ways,” she says, from reducing people’s sense of isolation to helping them develop skills and experiences that might be useful for a career to producing health benefits. There’s even the less tangible benefit that Speevak refers to as “this magic moment when you feel like this is what was meant to happen, and I’m a part of it.”

VOLUNTEERING, 21ST CENTURY STYLE

Speevak encourages us to challenge our traditional concepts of volunteering. “People have a pretty fixed notion of what it entails — like serving tea in a nursing home,” she says. “But there are different [less formal] ways that people can engage in the community.” Participating in neighbourhood events, coordinating a crowd-sourcing effort to help a disabled neighbour get a van, or using social media to find people to speak out on civil issues all count.

As you will likely discover, volunteering doesn’t just give you that sense of feeling useful. You may find that you are helping yourself in ways that you didn’t ever expect.



NO TIME NO PROBLEM

Microvolunteering is a trend that’s grown over the past 10 years to provide “short-time” ways to contribute by working independently on quick projects. These involve completing a single task that doesn’t require training or screening and often has the benefit of showing you results quickly.

The Volunteer Canada website lists lots of microvolunteering ideas under “Engaging Volunteers.” Here are a few.

1. Get involved in a flash mob to bring awareness to an issue.

2. Sign a petition. Check out change.org to find a cause you want to support.

3. Knit, sew or crochet a blanket for Blankets for Canada.

4. Jog, hike, walk or dance to raise money for charity. Choose one of more than 40 charity partners to donate to through Charity Miles. Download the app and learn how to get started.

5. Do odd jobs like gardening, cleaning or home repairs or tutor someone. Check out neighbordoo.com, a free platform that matches people who need help with people who can do the work. Although some of this work is paid, you can also volunteer. *bt*