Volunteering and its Surprising Benefits

Helping Yourself While Helping Others

With busy lives, it can be hard to find time to volunteer. However, the benefits of volunteering are enormous to you, your family, and your community. The right match can help you find friends, reach out to the community, learn new skills, and even advance your career. Volunteering can also help protect your mental and physical health. Learn more about the many benefits of volunteering and find tips on getting started as a volunteer.

Volunteering: The happiness effect

Helping others kindles happiness, as many studies have demonstrated. When researchers at the *London School of Economics* examined the relationship between volunteering and measures of happiness in a large group of American adults, they found the more people volunteered, the happier they were, according to a study in Social Science and Medicine. **Compared with people who never volunteered, the odds of being "very happy" rose 7% among those who volunteer monthly and 12% for people who volunteer every two to four weeks.** Among weekly volunteers, 16% felt very happy—a hike in happiness comparable to having an income of $75,000–$100,000 versus $20,000, say the researchers. Giving time to religious organizations had the greatest impact.

* A special health report published by Harvard Health Publications.

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Benefits of volunteering #1:

Volunteering connects you to others

One of the better-known benefits of volunteering is the impact on the community. Unpaid volunteers are often the glue that holds a community together. Volunteering allows you to connect to your community and make it a better place. However, volunteering is a two-way street, and it can benefit you and your family as much as the cause you choose to help. Dedicating your time as a volunteer helps you make new friends, expand your network, and boost your social skills.

Volunteering helps you make new friends and contacts

One of the best ways to make new friends and strengthen existing relationships is to commit to a shared activity together. Volunteering is a great way to meet new people, especially if you are new to an area. Volunteering also strengthens your ties to the community and broadens your support network, exposing you to people with common interests, neighborhood resources, and fun and fulfilling activities.

Volunteering increases your social and relationship skills

While some people are naturally outgoing, others are shy and have a hard time meeting new people. Volunteering gives you the opportunity to practice and develop your social skills, since you are meeting regularly with a group of people with common interests. Once you have momentum, it's easier to branch out and make more friends and contacts.

Volunteering as a family

While it might be a challenge to coordinate everyone's schedules, volunteering as a family has many worthwhile benefits. Children watch everything you do. By giving back to the community, you show them firsthand how volunteering makes a difference and how good it feels to help others and enact change. It's also a valuable way for you to get to know organizations in the community and find resources and activities for your children and family.

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When it comes to volunteering, passion and positivity are the only requirements

While learning new skills can be beneficial to many, it's not a requirement for a fulfilling volunteer experience. Bear in mind that the most valuable skills you can bring to any volunteer effort are compassion, an open mind, a willingness to do whatever is needed, and a positive attitude.

Benefits of volunteering #2:

Volunteering is good for your mind and body

Volunteering provides many benefits to both mental and physical health.

- **Volunteering increases self-confidence.** Volunteering can provide a healthy boost to your self-confidence, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. You are doing good for others and the community, which provides a natural sense of accomplishment. Your role as a volunteer can also give you a sense of pride and identity. And the better you feel about yourself, the more likely you are to have a positive view of your life and future goals.

- **Volunteering combats depression.** Reducing the risk of depression is another important benefit of volunteering. A key risk factor for depression is social isolation. Volunteering keeps you in regular contact with others and helps you develop a solid support system, which in turn protects you against stress and depression when you're going through challenging times.

- **Volunteering helps you stay physically healthy.** Volunteering is good for your health at any age, but it's especially beneficial in older adults. Studies have found that those who volunteer have a lower mortality rate than those who do not, even when considering factors like the health of the participants. Volunteering has also been shown to lessen symptoms of chronic pain or heart disease.

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Benefits of volunteering #3:

Volunteering can advance your career

If you're considering a new career, volunteering can help you get experience in your area of interest and meet people in the field. Even if you're not planning on changing careers, volunteering gives you the opportunity to practice important skills used in the workplace, such as teamwork, communication, problem solving, project planning, task management, and organization. You might feel more comfortable stretching your wings at work once you've honed these skills in a volunteer position first.

Volunteering can provide career experience

Volunteering offers you the chance to try out a new career without making a long-term commitment. It is also a great way to gain experience in a new field. In some fields, you can volunteer directly at an organization that does the kind of work you're interested in. For example, if you're interested in nursing, you could volunteer at a hospital or a nursing home. Your volunteer work might also expose you to professional organizations or internships that could be of benefit to your career.

Volunteering can teach you valuable job skills

Just because volunteer work is unpaid does not mean the skills you learn are basic. Many volunteering opportunities provide extensive training. For example, you could become an experienced crisis counselor while volunteering for a women's shelter or a knowledgeable art historian while donating your time as a museum docent.

Volunteering can also help you build upon skills you already have and use them to benefit the greater community. For instance, if you hold a successful sales position, you raise awareness for your favorite cause as a volunteer advocate, while further developing and improving your public speaking, communication, and marketing skills.

Benefits of volunteering #4:

Volunteering brings fun and fulfillment to your life

Volunteering is a fun and easy way to explore your interests and passions. Doing volunteer work you find meaningful and interesting can be a relaxing, energizing escape from your day-to-day routine of work, school, or family commitments. Volunteering also provides you with renewed creativity, motivation, and vision that can carry over into your personal and professional life. Many people volunteer in order to make time for hobbies outside of work as well.

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Tips for Getting Started Volunteering

First, ask yourself if there is something specific you want to do.

For example, do I want...
...to make it better around where I live
...to meet people who are different from me
...to try something new
...to do something with my spare time
...to see a different way of life and new places
...to have a go at the type of work I might want to do as a full-time job
...to do more with my interests and hobbies
...to do something I'm good at

The best way to volunteer is to match your personality and interests. Having answers to these questions will help you narrow down your search.

To Volunteer with

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