

HELPING OTHERS IS GOOD FOR YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

One of the most natural responses to any crises we face is to protect ourselves. With the impact of COVID-19 lingering and spreading its impact over several weeks, it is normal for us to live in survival mode, looking for threats to our safety and security and worrying about how we will respond to the worst-case-scenario our mind can imagine. This survival instinct does a good job of keeping us alive, but over an extended period of time, it reeks havoc on our mental health and even our physical health. One of the most effective ways you can break away from the day-to-day effects of dwelling on your own problems is to help someone else with theirs.

Helping others has many significant benefits to your own mental health. Giving of yourself to others helps you think less about the stressors in your life and allows you to give more attention to how you are alleviating some of the hardships others are facing. This, in turn, improves how you think about yourself, about the value you bring to those around you and provides a sense of accomplishment. It can even reduce stress and increase feelings of calm.

Going out of your way to be of service to others enables you to see that you have a clear purpose for your life and that others are being positively affected by you and your actions. This sense of belonging, self-esteem and value improves your own confidence, increases your desire to give even more of yourself away and actually has a physiological, as well as an emotional, effect on your sense of well-being. By shifting your focus away from self and onto the good you can do for others, you remove the echo chamber of self-defeating thoughts that tend to resonate in your own mind.

By shifting your focus onto the needs of others and away from self, you also undermine the thinking patterns that support depression and anxiety. Serving others increases your appreciation for the positives in your own life and alters your perspective of your circumstances.

You also improve your sense of self-worth. Many mental health issues come from our perception that we are broken or damaged in some way. Helping others increases your sense of accomplishment and empowers you to see yourself as a valuable member of society who has something to contribute in improving the lives of others. The sense of pride this generates increases mood and cognitive functioning, empowering you to challenge and change any self-defeating thoughts and behaviors.

Investing your time, energy and resources to others also brings an enhanced sense of belonging, which reduces isolation and loneliness. A greater social connectedness is associated with a longer life, as well as increased happiness and improved physical and mental health.

What can you do to help others? First of all, do something you enjoy. Whether it's volunteering with an organization, spending time with house-bound relatives or neighbors, or writing notes of appreciation to people, if it is something you enjoy doing, even if you do not feel especially talented in that area, you will find it easier and more rewarding to do it on a regular basis.

Do not be afraid to step outside your comfort zone. Stretch yourself to try new things in your giving or volunteering – perhaps spending time with a group of people with whom you are not familiar, or getting to know a stranger. You may either develop new skills or discover hidden talents you never knew.

Finally, be generous with your time, energy and resources, but be cautious about over-committing. It is extremely valuable to incorporate regular volunteer time into your schedule, but be careful not to allow it to be a newly added stressor to your life. Know your limits and gradually build in your volunteer time until you discover the right balance for you. While the benefits of volunteering are substantial, the detriments of over-doing it can steal away what you hoped to accomplish in the first place.



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