Volunteering: Giving and Getting

If you found a way to improve your physical and mental health, live longer and feel more fulfilled, would you try it? More than a quarter of Americans ages 55 and older are already doing it: It's volunteering.

“The idea that charity is its own reward is true,” says sociologist Eva Kahana, Ph.D., distinguished university professor at Case Western Reserve University. “Serving others in need offers fulfillment and joy as well as many health benefits. Older adults in particular who volunteer report increased psychological well-being and feel a sense of purpose in their lives. It's a win-win situation. Our research based on 585 older adults [Journal of Aging and Health, 2014] found that altruistic orientations, volunteering and helping others resulted in greater life satisfaction and more positive affective states.”

Gain through giving
The benefits of volunteering for older adults have been long known: In a 1998 Canadian analysis of 29 studies, older adults reported the positive effect of volunteering on their well-being. Many studies since then reveal that people who volunteer are happier and more resilient and have better social connections when compared with nonvolunteers.

Volunteering is also a way for older people who are more likely to have retired or lost a spouse to stay active and involved in their communities. The structure and social support that volunteer activities provide may help stave off depression that often accompanies chronic illnesses and major role transitions, including moving into long-term care residences.

“Volunteering can take your mind off your own physical or personal problems,” says Dr. Kahana. “Older adults who volunteer are more satisfied and feel a sense of purpose in their lives. From a cognitive standpoint, volunteering keeps you mentally stimulated by routinely engaging with others and planning and carrying out your volunteer responsibilities. Some studies have suggested that volunteer work can slow or offset cognitive decline, although more research needs to be conducted in that area.”

If you have certain disabilities or chronic conditions, you may also see benefits from volunteering. A 2011 study in Research on Aging concluded that depression in older volunteers with both hearing and vision loss (called dual sensory loss, or DSL)—a condition that has a high risk of depression—improved substantially when compared with nonvolunteers who had DSL. Another 2011 study, in The International Journal of Aging and Human Development, revealed the significant positive effects on the well-being of adults with chronic conditions, including high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, arthritis, asthma or digestive disorders.

Observational research suggests that older Americans who volunteer live longer and experience fewer disabilities than nonvolunteers. A 2013 analysis in BMC Public Health points to studies suggesting that volunteering increases longevity by 22 percent.

Some experts suggest the physical activity involved in many forms of volunteering—especially environmental volunteering in areas such as parks or nature reserves—improves volunteers’ health, which protects them against a variety of health conditions. But if that sounds too strenuous, rest assured that simply traveling back and forth to the volunteer location or performing volunteer-related tasks like serving food increases activity, too. “In addition, the generosity of spirit that can motivate volunteering and helping others also provides mental health benefits,” says Dr. Kahana.

The more you volunteer, the more benefits you reap, but only up to a certain point, say researchers in a 2014 study in Psychological Bulletin. Volunteering two to three hours a week, or about 100 hours a year, seems to confer the most benefits—more than that and the benefits appear to diminish, possibly because anything longer begins to feel like a nagging commitment.

Getting started
To learn more about volunteer opportunities, visit the Corporation for National and Community Service’s database aimed at older Americans (www.GetInvolved.gov), the government’s official website (www.volunteer.gov) or the American Red Cross (www.redcross.org/support/volunteer).

Volunteering abroad
International volunteering among older adults has increased in popularity over the past decade, driven in part by the growth of the United States’ 55+ population.

Choose programs carefully: Some experts suggest that ill-designed “voluntourism” programs can cause more harm than good in the areas they serve, such as taking much-needed jobs away from unskilled workers and giving them to volunteers instead. One established organization is the Peace Corps (peacecorps.gov), which offers a comprehensive program for people 50 and older.