

Volunteering Does a Body Good

For the heart and the spirit, experts say, give a little and you will get a lot back

By Angela Haupt

Brooke Ellison could have been bitter, rendered a quadriplegic at age 11 when she was struck by a car while walking home from her first day of junior high. Instead, she's living a fuller life than she could have imagined when doctors told her she'd never walk again. The secret, says Ellison, 31, of Stony Brook, N.Y., is helping others cope with their own life-altering challenges. "My mother tells me it makes me glow, and I feel it. I feel invigorated," she says. "Where I've gotten over the past 20 years—and my ability to continue moving forward, living my life as fully as possible—is a direct result of what I feel I can give to other people."

And she has gotten far: Ellison graduated from Harvard with a bachelor's degree in cognitive neuroscience in 2000 and a master's in public policy in 2004. That year, *The Brooke Ellison Story*, directed by Christopher Reeve, premiered on the cable channel A&E. Today, Ellison is pursuing a doctorate in sociology at Stony Brook University. All the while, she says, reaching out to others has improved her own well-being, which researchers say is no surprise.

Why volunteering makes us healthier is rooted in biology, says Stephen Post, coauthor of *Why Good Things Happen to Good People* (2007) and director of the Center for Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care, and Bioethics at Stony Brook University. "One of the best ways to get your mind off your aches and pains is to get your mind on somebody else," he says. "This is a new science, but it does seem that

we involve the brain, we involve the immune system, and we probably involve certain hormones, like oxytocin—the compassion hormone."

A variety of studies over the years suggest that, no matter where they begin healthwise, volunteers reap physical and emotional benefits, including less stress and depression, and longer lives. Volunteering is particularly beneficial to adults 65 and older and those who serve more than 100 hours each year. In a survey of more than 4,500 adults released in April by UnitedHealthcare and VolunteerMatch, 68 percent said they felt better physically since they started volunteering; 29 percent said giving back was helping them to manage a chronic condition. And volunteers were more likely to report

a greater sense of well-being—and of purpose and meaning in their lives—than nonvolunteers.

Lending a hand can lessen pain and boost functional abilities, like walking and doing heavy work around the house, according to a Corporation for National and Community Service report. High levels of oxytocin decrease stress, which in turn helps ward off illness and keeps the body healthy, Post says. Volunteering also elevates levels of the body's natural opiates, like endorphins, or "happy hormones," and dopamine.

For older adults prone to social isolation, volunteering offers enhanced social networks and a way to stay active in the community—and, with that, a sense of belonging. It also can improve volunteers' perception of their own competence.

People who help others tend to live longer: "Helping is

an independent, unique predictor of reduced risk of mortality," says psychologist Stephanie Brown of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. "There's a very reliable association." Brown followed more than 400 elderly couples for five years, and found that people who provided hands-on support were half as likely to die over the study period as nonvolunteers—even when adjusting for factors like baseline health, mental health, and age.

Ellison spends much of her time these days giving inspirational speeches and working one-on-one with people who need help. She says she was frank and upfront when she met recently with a teenager who had suffered an extensive spinal cord injury and was refusing to eat or speak with her family. "I've become very sensitive to the struggles people face, and people have become very open to sharing their lives with

me," she says. "I've learned that you can only make meaning out of your challenge by helping others through theirs."

Not all who volunteer, of course, will experience the so-called helper's high. A study published in the *Gerontologist* in March suggests volunteers benefit most when programs provide strong "organizational support." That translates to volunteers finding their work interesting, feeling that they're being used effectively, and receiving positive feedback. "Having a practical, optimal opportunity makes a difference," Post says.

The bottom line? It's good to be good. "Try to be generous and kind and helpful to people and you're going to be shielded from a number of stress-related illnesses," Post says. "And odds are, you're going to live a little longer." ●



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