

The Science of Service

“I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples.” -Mother Teresa

Acts of service do more than meet immediate needs, they strengthen the systems that sustain community life. Research continues to confirm what experience has always shown: serving others benefits both the giver and the receiver. It improves well-being, builds connection, and creates trust that can endure hardship. When we serve, we strengthen more than systems; we strengthen the shared humanity that holds communities together.

1. The Human Science Behind Service

“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” -African Proverb

Modern research gives language to what people have known for generations. We are built to cooperate. Serving others releases hormones that reduce stress and strengthen emotional bonds. Working together deepens empathy and belonging. Within a neighborhood or city, these same forces build trust and collective resilience.

Service begins with one person and spreads outward. It changes how you see others and how you see yourself. Over time, that shift supports healthier relationships and a more balanced way of living - both for individuals and for the communities they sustain.

2. The Health and Well-Being Impact

“If you want to lift yourself up, lift up someone else.” - Booker T. Washington.

- **Physical and Mental Health Benefits**

Serving others is good for the heart, both literally and figuratively. Research from leading health authorities and national studies on volunteering shows that consistent volunteering is linked to measurable improvements in overall health and well-being, including:

- Longer life expectancy and improved overall well-being¹

¹ O'Reilly, D., Rosato, M., Moriarty, J., & Leavy, G. (2017). **Volunteering and mortality risk: A partner-controlled quasi-experimental design.** *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 46(4), 1295–1302.

- Better control of blood pressure and heart health^{2, 3}
- Lower chronic inflammation and slower biological aging^{4, 5}
- Greater strength and independence, particularly for older adults⁶
- Reduced pain levels, especially among individuals with chronic illness⁷
- Reduced stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms^{8, 9, 10, 11}
- Higher levels of happiness, purpose, and emotional stability¹²

In serving others, you support your own well-being and help weave the kind of community where everyone can thrive. Service builds health in quiet, lasting ways—lowering stress, deepening connection, and giving each day a clearer sense of purpose. The result is a stronger you and a stronger community, each sustaining the other.

- **Service as Personal Growth**

Service is one of life's most effective teachers. It develops both skill and character, offering lessons that go beyond classrooms or careers. Those who engage in

² Piferi, R. L., & Lawler, K. A. (2006). **Social support and ambulatory blood pressure: An examination of both receiving and giving.** *International Journal of Psychophysiology*, 62(2), 328–336.

³ Sneed, R. S., & Cohen, S. (2013). **A prospective study of volunteerism and hypertension risk in older adults.** *Psychology and Aging*, 28(2), 578–586.

⁴ Nelson-Coffey, S. K., Fritz, M. M., Lyubomirsky, S., & Cole, S. W. (2017). **Kindness in the blood: A randomized controlled trial of the gene regulatory impact of prosocial behavior.** *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 81, 8–13.

⁵ Le Nguyen, K. D., Lin, J., Algoe, S. B., Brantley, M. M., Kim, S. L., Brantley, J., Salzberg, S., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2019). **Loving-kindness meditation slows biological aging in novices: Evidence from a 12-week randomized controlled trial.** *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 108, 20–27.

⁶ Gruenewald, T. L., Liao, D. H., & Seeman, T. E. (2012). **Contributing to others, contributing to oneself: Perceptions of generativity and health in later life.** *Journal of Gerontology: Series B, Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 67(6), 660–665.

⁷ Salt, E., Crofford, L. J., & Segerstrom, S. (2017). **The mediating and moderating effect of volunteering on pain and depression, life purpose, well-being, and physical activity.** *Pain Management Nursing*, 18(4), 243–249. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmn.2017.04.004>

⁸ von Dawans, B., Fischbacher, U., Kirschbaum, C., Fehr, E., & Heinrichs, M. (2012). **The social dimension of stress reactivity: Acute stress increases prosocial behavior in humans.** *Psychological Science*, 23(6), 651–660.

⁹ Alden, L. E., & Trew, J. L. (2013). **If it makes you happy: Engaging in kind acts increases positive affect in socially anxious individuals.** *Emotion*, 13(1), 64–75.

¹⁰ Schacter, H. L., & Margolin, G. (2019). **When it feels good to give: Depressive symptoms, daily prosocial behavior, and adolescent mood.** *Emotion*, 19(5), 923–927.

¹¹ Field, T. M., Hernandez-Reif, M., Quintino, O., Schanberg, S., & Kuhn, C. (1998). **Elder retired volunteers benefit from giving massage therapy to infants.** *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 17(2), 229–239.

¹² Nelson, S. K., Layous, K., Cole, S. W., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2016). **Do unto others or treat yourself? The effects of prosocial and self-focused behavior on psychological flourishing.** *Emotion*, 16(6), 850–861.

meaningful service often find that it strengthens abilities that matter in every area of life, including:

- o Leadership and teamwork: learning to organize, listen, and guide others toward shared goals.
- o Problem-solving and adaptability: applying creativity and persistence to meet real-world challenges.
- o Empathy, cultural understanding: learning to collaborate across backgrounds, beliefs, and perspectives to find shared purpose.
- o Communication and conflict resolution: building trust and clarity through dialogue and shared responsibility.
- o Resilience and purpose: staying grounded during setbacks and finding meaning in contribution.

Service teaches through experience, shaping how you think, lead, and connect with others. The lessons stay with you long after any single project ends, influencing the way you approach work, relationships, and community life.

- **Healthy Communities, Healthy Individuals**

Service is also a public health tool. When people serve, they not only improve their own well-being but strengthen the networks that support collective health.

Communities with high volunteer engagement tend to experience stronger social ties, less isolation, and greater resilience during hardship.

Service builds bridges between people who might not otherwise meet. It turns empathy into shared effort and makes cooperation a form of prevention - one that protects both body and spirit. A healthy city is not only one with access to care; it's one where care itself is part of daily life, expressed through simple, steady acts of service that keep people and places strong.

3. Service at Every Age

“No one is useless in this world who lightens the burdens of another.” -Charles Dickens

Service offers benefits that last a lifetime. At every age, it supports growth, builds connection, and strengthens both personal and community well-being. Studies across generations - from youth initiatives to senior volunteer programs - show that meaningful service builds skills, promotes health, and nurtures belonging throughout life.

- **Youth and Adolescents**

Early involvement in service helps young people discover who they are and what they can contribute. When students take part in service-learning or community projects, they see that their choices can make a real difference.

Research shows that youth participation in service is linked to:

- Greater engagement and achievement in school.^{13, 14}
- Increased confidence and stronger teamwork and communication skills.¹⁵
- Lower rates of risky behavior and higher self-esteem.^{16, 17}
- A stronger sense of responsibility and connection to their community.^{18, 19}

Early experiences like these help youth recognize their ability to contribute and prepare them for a lifetime of meaningful participation.

● Young Adults and Families

For young adults, service offers purpose during times of transition. It provides a way to channel ambition into contribution and to build relationships through shared goals. For families, volunteering together strengthens connection and teaches empathy by example.

Studies find that service among young adults and families leads to:

- Greater life satisfaction and emotional well-being.²⁰

¹³ Caprara, G. V., Barbaranelli, C., Pastorelli, C., Bandura, A., & Zimbardo, P. G. (2000). **Prosocial foundations of children's academic achievement.** *Psychological Science*, 11(4), 302–306.

¹⁴ Lievens, F., Ones, D. S., & Dilchert, S. (2009). **Personality scale validities increase throughout medical school.** *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 94(6), 1514–1535.

¹⁵ Giancaspro, M. L., & Manuti, A. (2021). **Learning to be employable through volunteering: A qualitative study on the development of employability capital of young people.** *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 628522. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.628522>

¹⁶ Mongrain, M., Chin, J. M., & Shapira, L. B. (2011). **Practicing compassion increases happiness and self-esteem.** *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 12, 963–981.

¹⁷ **Algera, P.** (2022). *What is the impact of volunteering on a young person's life?* Independent research report commissioned by the Student Volunteer Army and supported by Lottery Community Sector Research. Kin Strategy & Research. <https://communityresearch.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/What-is-the-impact-of-volunteering-on-a-young-persons-life-V1.pdf>

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¹⁹ **Billig, M.** (2019). *Incorporating volunteer youth in emergency teams: The effect of the cognitive–emotional spiral.* *Cogent Psychology*, 6(1), Article 1704610. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2019.1704610>

²⁰ Steger, M. F., Kashdan, T. B., & Oishi, S. (2008). **Being good by doing good: Daily eudaimonic activity and well-being.** *Journal of Research in Personality*, 42, 22–42.

- Stronger family bonds and clearer communication.²¹
- Expanded professional opportunities and greater financial stability.^{22, 23}
- A deeper commitment to community involvement and giving.²⁴

When service becomes a shared routine, generosity turns into habit. Families grow closer, and the communities around them grow stronger.

• Older Adults

For older adults, service brings renewed purpose and meaningful connection. Mentoring, teaching, and volunteering allow people to share their experience and stay active in ways that benefit both themselves and others.

Research from leading health organizations shows that regular volunteering among older adults is associated with:

- Lower rates of depression and cognitive decline.^{25, 26}
- Fewer feelings of loneliness or isolation.²⁷
- Improved mobility, overall health, and longer life expectancy.^{28, 29}
- A deeper sense of purpose and satisfaction.³⁰

²¹ Lewton, A. R., & Nievar, M. A. (2012). Strengthening families through volunteerism: Integrating family volunteerism and family life education. *Marriage & Family Review*, 48(7), 689–710. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2012.700909>

²² Hardy, C. L., & Van Vugt, M. (2006). **Nice guys finish first: The competitive altruism hypothesis.** *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32(10), 1402–1413.

²³ Eriksson, K., Vartanova, I., Strimling, P., & Simpson, B. (2020). **Generosity pays: Selfish people have fewer children and earn less money.** *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 118(3), 532–544.

²⁴ Kim, J., & Morgül, K. (2017). **Long-term consequences of youth volunteering: Voluntary versus involuntary service.** *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 28(3), 1108–1125. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-016-9708-5>

²⁵ Musick, M. A., & Wilson, J. (2003). **Volunteering and depression: The role of psychological and social resources in different age groups.** *Social Science & Medicine*, 56(2), 259–269.

²⁶ Anderson, N. D., Damianakis, T., Kröger, E., Wagner, L. M., Dawson, D. R., Binns, M. A., Bernstein, S., Caspi, E., & Cook, S. L.; BRAVO Team. (2014). **The benefits associated with volunteering among seniors: A critical review and recommendations for future research.** *Psychological Bulletin*, 140(6), 1505–1533.

²⁷ Lee, S. (2021). **Volunteering and loneliness in older adults: A parallel mediation model.** *Aging & Mental Health*, 26(10), 2159–2166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13607863.2021.1913477>

²⁸ Okun, M. A., Yeung, E. W., & Brown, S. (2013). **Volunteering by older adults and risk of mortality: A meta-analysis.** *Psychology and Aging*, 28(2), 564–577.

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Service reminds us that every stage of life holds value. Experience, patience, and compassion often grow stronger with age, and sharing them keeps both individuals and communities thriving.

In Conclusion

Service changes how we live together. It strengthens health, builds understanding, and turns care into something we can see and feel. Each time we choose to help, the communities around us grow a little stronger. That is the quiet power of service; it moves through everyday actions that make life better for all of us.

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