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Receiving the Benefits of Giving

How philanthropy impacts emotional well-being.

BY DEBORAH WALDEN OSSI

Contemporary psychology proves that the old saying rings true: It's better to give than to receive. The reasons why giving is beneficial go beyond morality or obligation. Philanthropy establishes a deeper connection between individuals and families, friends and communities. Giving can also help people become better acquainted with themselves, thus improving their relationships and fostering well-being.

GIVING AND MENTAL HEALTH

Generous people tend to be happier for a number of reasons according to psychology. Denver therapist, Hilary Silver, says, "The act of giving benefits the giver. It meets some of our basic emotional needs that drive all of human behavior: love and connection, certainty, significance, growth and contribution beyond the self." Many experts agree that giving is good for individuals because it fulfills emotional needs that often go unmet. People experience stress at home and work, and yet their basic emotional longings for growth, connection and significance are unaddressed.

Counselor, Brenda Smith, agrees that feeling connected is an important part of giving. "We're all social beings and need to be around other people. And when we are around people who are like-minded, we feel met and liked." Counselor, Clinton Nunnally, believes that the sense of belonging people gain from volunteer work is essential. "It causes us to drop the illusion of separateness from other people and even nature and realize what is true, that there is actually this deep connectedness." This perk of giving is beneficial to those who are new to a city or community or those who find that the emptiness of social media connections has left a void.

Mental Health Center of Denver's President and CEO, Dr. Carl Clark, asserts that volunteering and financial giving can add dimension to one's happiness. "A lot of what people want in their lives is well-being and positive emotions. What people generally think about with positive emotions is happiness. You can go out and do something you



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like. That happiness lasts about as long as you are doing that activity. There is another kind of positive feeling that occurs when you do something good for somebody else. You can get that feeling back at any time, just by remembering that happy moment you had together. That type of well-being and happiness is long lasting.”

Psychologists agree that helping others is

good for individuals because it shifts attention away from their own problems. This can be especially helpful for people who are feeling stuck or suffering from the holiday blues. Silver asserts that philanthropy is also helpful for those looking to boost self-esteem. “You’re never too old to build your self-esteem. Whenever you decide to do something because it’s important to you, you start to trust yourself


more. Not only do you benefit because you are helping others, but you also know that you can rely on yourself to shift into a better mental state.” Smith echoes these sentiments: “When our hearts are open and flowing, it helps us feel good. We feel like good people and it gives us a sense of value.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF AUTHENTICITY

Experts caution that giving back only builds well-being and self-confidence under the right circumstances. For those who thrive on giving so much to others that they become martyrs, giving might actually do more harm than good. The benefits may be minimal for people who feel no personal connection to a particular cause or who are pressured by work or family to volunteer.

How does one tap into the mental and emotional benefits of philanthropy? The answer is in authenticity and the attitude toward one’s self. Nunnally says, “Whenever we are giving authentically—when we are not giving back because we think we are supposed to—it comes from a place of abundance and gratitude. It comes from a place of enoughness.”

Dr. Clark believes that giving should be accompanied by a feeling that one is getting something back emotionally. “We have people who give so much that they don’t take care of themselves. That group of folks is actually at risk for being burned out,” he says. “There has to be a combination of giving, but giving things that you get something from. Well-being is having positive experiences, to be able to say, ‘Wow, I’m really interested in something. I’m in awe of something. I’m inspired. I feel really good when I’m around these people.’ That active engagement is part of well-being.”

For counselor, Jenny Glick, the ability to genuinely give to others stems from the ability to give to oneself. “From my perspective, we would all be served globally if more people gave to themselves. We would go and do things to help other people. How we give in the external world is how we give to ourselves.” 



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