

The impact of volunteering on happiness and health

8 August 2016

Introduction

This information sheet includes some research and analysis about the impact of volunteering on happiness and health. The source of each research finding or recommendation is provided as an end note.

Happiness and mental health

A source of joy

A study done in 1996 identified volunteering as the second greatest source of joy. Dancing was first.ⁱ

Favourable effect on depression

- A study done in 2003 found that formal volunteering has a beneficial effect on depressive symptoms.ⁱⁱ
- In 2013, a University of Exeter meta-analysis of 40 studies found that volunteering had favourable effect on depression, life satisfaction and wellbeing.ⁱⁱⁱ

Reduces psychological impact of low socioeconomic status

Findings of a 2008 study indicate that low socioeconomic status is associated with poor health both among those who volunteer and those who do not. However, low socioeconomic status is associated with unhappiness only among those who do not volunteer, while volunteers are equally likely to be happy whether they have high or low socioeconomic status.^{iv}

Improves emotional health

In 2013, a United Health Group study (US) of 3351 people found that:

- 94% of people who volunteered in the last twelve months say that volunteering improves their mood.
- Volunteers have better personal scores than non-volunteers on nine well-established measures of emotional wellbeing including personal independence, capacity for rich interpersonal relationships and overall satisfaction with life.
- 78% of people who volunteered in the last twelve months say that volunteering lowers their stress levels.
- Volunteers are more likely than US adults overall to report that they felt calm and peaceful most of the time, and that they had a lot of energy most of the time, over the past four weeks.
- 96% of people who volunteered in the last twelve months say that volunteering enriches their sense of purpose in life.^v

In 2014, a Citizens Advice Bureau study (UK) of 1500 volunteers found that:^{vi}

- 3 in 5 say that volunteering has made them feel less stressed.
- 3 in 4 who identified as having a mental health condition felt better able to manage their condition.
- 4 in 5 believe that volunteering had a positive effect on their mental or physical health.

Social integration

- A 2008 study showed that through meeting new people and reaffirming established social contacts, volunteers gain a sense of belonging and feel connected to the wider society. This in turn is seen to combat depression associated with loneliness.^{vii}
- In 2013, a United Health Group study found that volunteering helps people connect and socialise—volunteers are more likely than non-volunteers to socialise and they do so more frequently.^{viii}
- A 2003 study has shown how through building networks, bonds, trust and common values with other people, and thereby by developing 'social capital', volunteering increases people's access to help and support from other people. This contributes to the well-being of an individual, as they have a network of support which they can draw on to help them cope with difficult, stressful and potentially harmful situations.^{ix}

Developing Skills and Experience

The 2016 Volunteering Australia State of Volunteering report asked volunteers to indicate what personal traits or professional skills they have improved through volunteering:

- 60% indicated they had developed patience
- 55% improved teamwork skills
- 54% improved confidence skills
- 46% improved friendliness
- 45% improved cooperation
- 40% developed problem-solving skills
- 39% improved resourcefulness
- 37% increased resilience
- 37% improved their written and verbal communication skills
- 37% improved planning and organising skills
- 36% increased versatility
- 36% improved interpersonal skills
- 33% increased leadership/management ability
- 31% improved attention to detail
- 28% increased organisation skills
- 25% improved time management
- 22% improved computer/technical literacy
- 19% increased independence
- 17% further developed their analytical and research skills
- 3% even learned a new language!^x

However, in the same report only 2% of respondents indicated that they participate in volunteering to improve their health and wellbeing.

Expands our sense of time

- A study conducted by Yale and Harvard Universities suggests that volunteering our limited time – giving it away – may actually increase our sense of unhurried leisure.^{xi}
- A 2015 study of 746 Swiss workers found that volunteering (albeit energy- and time-consuming) may contribute to a greater sense of work-life balance for people in the workforce, which might in turn positively influence mental health.^{xii}

Better than giving money

A 2008 study based on data from 41 communities across the US found that volunteering is highly associated with greater health and happiness, while other forms of altruistic behaviour (such as donating money or blood) are not.^{xiii}

Good for your love life

Singles may find love through volunteering.^{xiv}

Physical health and longevity

Feel healthier

In 2013, a United Health Group study found that:

- 76% of people who volunteered in the last twelve months say that volunteering has made them feel healthier.
- 80% of people who volunteered in the last twelve months say they feel they have control over their health.
- About a quarter of the people who have volunteered in the past 12 months say that volunteering has helped them to manage a chronic illness.^{xv}

Reduced blood pressure

In 2013, a US study followed people aged over 50 for four years and found that those who had volunteered at least 200 hours in the previous 12 months were less likely to develop hypertension than non-volunteers. There was no association between volunteerism and hypertension risk at lower levels of volunteer participation. Volunteering at least 200 hours was also associated with greater increases in psychological well-being.^{xvi}

Less visits to the doctor

A 2005 study found an inverse relationship between numbers of hours spent volunteering and the number of times older people visited a doctor.^{xvii}

Reduces pain

People suffering from chronic pain experience declines in their pain intensity when they began to serve as volunteers for others also suffering from chronic pain.^{xviii}

Delay declining brain function

In 2009, a small study found that older adults who volunteered were able to delay or even reverse declining brain functioning. They made gains in key brain regions that support cognitive abilities important to planning an organising daily life.^{xix}

Longer life expectancy

A 2013 University of Exeter meta-analysis of five studies identified a 22% reduction in early mortality among volunteers compared to non-volunteers.^{xx}

So good for you that doctors should recommend it

In 2012, Dr Stephen Post, from Stony Brook University in New York believes recommending unpaid work should be a part of the "culture of healthcare systems". Happiness, health and longevity are the benefits that have been reported in more than 50 investigations. This includes a 2009 study of 5000 Americans, which found that volunteers felt physically healthier, happier, less stressed and slept better than those who did not volunteer. Dr Post said the patients who would most benefit from such recommendations include the elderly, those with depression and people overcoming major injuries.^{xxi}

Healthy communities

Data from the U.S. Census Bureau found that states with a high volunteer rate also have lower rates of mortality and incidences of heart disease.^{xxii} These state-level findings parallel those of noted sociologist Robert Putnam, who found a strong correlation between the level of social capital generated by a wide range of voluntary activities and positive social consequences (e.g. lower levels of violent crime, lower mortality levels and better educational outcomes).^{xxiii}

Who benefits from volunteering?

Older people

- US and Canadian researchers reviewed 73 studies into the psychosocial benefits of volunteering for people aged over 50 and found it is associated with a reduced risk of depression and better overall health. They found that volunteering 2-3 hours a week is enough to reap the health benefits — doing more did not seem to lead to additional health improvements. People with chronic health conditions appeared benefit most.^{xxiv}
- In 2006, an Australian qualitative study into volunteering in later life found that volunteering gives older people a sense of fulfilling a productive role with ageing and subsequently increasing their self-esteem and self-efficacy. It also highlighted how social integration and gaining a sense of belonging is a chief benefit of volunteering for older people.^{xxv}
- Two analyses of longitudinal data from the Americans' Changing Lives survey demonstrate that older adults receive greater physical and mental health benefits from volunteering than younger volunteers.^{xxvi}

People experiencing mental illness

Results of a 2003 survey of people who experience mental health illness, suggested that volunteering improves people's mental health by giving direction and meaning to their lives.^{xxvii}

People in chronic pain

A 2002 study found that individuals suffering from chronic pain experienced declines in their pain intensity and decreased levels of disability and depression when they began to serve as peer volunteers for others also suffering from chronic pain.^{xxviii}

People who have had heart attacks

According to a Duke study of individuals with post-coronary artery disease, those individuals who volunteered after their heart attack reported reductions in despair and depression, two factors that have been linked to an increased likelihood of mortality in this type of patient.^{xxix}

How much volunteering is needed?

The volunteering threshold

- A number of studies have sought to identify whether the amount or type of volunteering in which an individual engages might affect the health benefits from the volunteer activities. These studies indicate that there is not a linear relationship between the amount of volunteering and health benefits. In other words, more is not necessarily better. Instead, there appears to be a 'volunteering threshold' (an amount necessary for health benefits to be derived). Once that threshold is met, no additional health benefits are acquired by volunteering more.^{xxx}
- Two studies both found that the volunteering threshold is 100 hours per year, or about two hours a week. Typically, no or little relationship was found between volunteering and positive health outcomes when an individual engaged in less than 100 hours per year. There did not appear to be any additional benefits to health as the number of volunteer hours increased beyond 100 hours.^{xxxi}
- Another study found a more moderate level of volunteering was necessary for health benefits. Those individuals who volunteered at least 40 hours per year, as well as those who volunteered with just one organization, or group, had the lowest risk of mortality.^{xxxii}

Too much volunteering can be bad for you

- A 2004 Flinders University study of 530 people noted that while many people get a lot out of volunteering, some volunteers believed their health had been negatively affected by a number of elements associated with volunteering, including witnessing difficult or depressing situations, observing conflict and pushing themselves to do too much.^{xxxiii}
- A 2008, Australian National University study of 1000 people in their 60s found that those who did more than 15 hours per week paid a price in terms of a significant decrease in their mental health and psychological wellbeing. The study found the main reason people volunteered for more than 15 hours per week was because of a shortage of volunteers and a perception that more time was need to get the job done.^{xxxiv}

Implications for volunteer management

Recognising the complexity of the evidence

While there is a large amount of evidence which shows that volunteering has a positive impact on the health of individuals and communities, there are a number of dynamics which complicate this relationship. This points to the need for a more nuanced approach to understanding the benefits associated with volunteering, recognising how they vary between different groups.^{xxxv}

Preventing burn out

- Dr Anna Ziersch (co-author of the 2004 Flinders University study) suggested that volunteering should be done within reasonable limits. *'Like any areas of our lives, we need to make sure we don't overdo things'*, she said. Some volunteers may need to make adjustments if they feel their health is being compromised (for example, by seeking support, reducing the extent of their involvement, dropping a particular responsibility or where necessary, ceasing their involvement). It is the responsibility of volunteer-involving organisations to monitor the health of their volunteers and make sure they are adequately supported and trained to handle difficult situations. It is important to manage the workloads for volunteers and to be realistic about what they can achieve. ^{xxxvi}
- Dr Tim Windsor (co-author of the 2008 ANU study) says the findings highlight the importance of not overcommitting to volunteer work as high levels of volunteering is not such a positive thing. He also said the findings highlight the need to boost volunteer numbers and ensure adequate government and community support for the volunteering sector so that the burden of responsibility doesn't just fall to a few but is shared by many. ^{xxxvii}
- Celia Richardson from the Mental Health Foundation suggested that *'Volunteering, like work, has to be structured and managed to ensure that stress is minimised. Volunteering is best in an environment which is planned properly to maximise the benefits to the individual as well as the organisation.'* ^{xxxviii}

Dangers of coercion

An Australian study warns of the dangers of coercing people into volunteering. It argues that the choice and agency of the volunteer is central to the cultivation of feelings of purpose and self-esteem. Rather than forcing people, it suggests that volunteering should be encouraged through designing programs that attract volunteers and feed into their motivation. ^{xxxix}

Managing older volunteers

- Studies have highlighted the need to break down barriers to make volunteering more accessible to older people. For example, one study suggests that there should be a wider range of opportunities which meet different people's interests, abilities and needs and a focus on providing adequate transport and meeting expenses. ^{xi}
- In terms of managing older volunteers, one study suggests that there needs to be adequate training and support provided by a manager who possesses special knowledge and understanding of the older generation. ^{xii}

Managing volunteers with mental illness

In relation to managing volunteers with mental illness, one study highlights the importance of providing regular support and supervision by people with good interpersonal skills and knowledge of the implications of mental ill health. Their study reveals that the awareness of mental illness amongst all staff in organisations is also central to the engagement and retention of volunteers. ^{xiii}

Inquiries about this information sheet should be directed to:

Meghan Hopper
Senior Policy Officer
03 8327 8512
m.hopper@volunteeringvictoria.org.au

About Volunteering Victoria

Volunteering Victoria is the state peak body for volunteering. We provide support to volunteers and volunteer involving organisations, and represent the interests of volunteering in Victoria.

Level 2/491 King Street
West Melbourne VIC 3003
www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au
Ph 03 8327 8500 Fax 03 8327 8599

ABN 79 378 017 212 *Volunteering Victoria is endorsed as a Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR)*

ⁱ Hoff, K, 'Volunteer for your Health', CASA Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children, Jackson County, MO CASA, <<http://www.trenchhealth.com.au/articles/VolunteerForHappiness.pdf>>, accessed 4 August 2016.

ⁱⁱ Musick, M.A, Wilson, J. 2003, 'Volunteering and Depression: The Role of Psychological and Social Resources in Different Age Groups', *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 56, no. 2, p. 259.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jenkinson, C.E. et. al., 2013, 'Is volunteering a public health intervention? A systematic review and meta-analysis of the health and survival of volunteers,' *BMC Public Health*, vol. 13, p. 773, < <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/13/773>>, accessed 4 August 2016.

^{iv} Borgonovi, F, 2008, 'Doing well by doing good: The relationship between formal volunteering and self-reported health and happiness,' *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 66, no. 11, June 2008, pp. 2321–2334, <<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277953608000373>>, accessed 4 August 2016.

^v United Health Group, 'Doing Good is Good for You: 2013 Health and Volunteering Study,' <<http://www.unitedhealthgroup.com/~media/UHG/PDF/2013/UNH-Health-Volunteering-Study.ashx>>, accessed 4 August 2016.

^{vi} Citizens Advice, 2014, 'CAB Volunteering – How Everyone Benefits', United Kingdom, June 2014, <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/global/migrated_documents/corporate/value-volunteering-final-external-version-may-14.pdf>.

^{vii} Konwerski, P. A., Nashman, H. N., 2008, 'Philanthropy: A Benefit for Personnel and Organisations Managing Volunteers (Volunteer Therapy)', *Voluntary Action*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 46-59. <www.ivr.org.uk/evidence-bank/evidence-pages/Philanthropy>, accessed 4 August 2016.

^{viii} United Health Group, op. cit.

^{ix} Sixsmith, J., Boneham, M. 2003, 'Volunteering and the concept of Social Capital',. *Voluntary Action*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 47-60, <www.ivr.org.uk/evidence-bank/evidencepages/Volunteering+and+the+concept+of+social+capital>, accessed 4 August 2016.

^x Volunteering Australia and PwC 2016, 'State of Volunteering in Australia', <<http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/2016/04/2016-state-of-volunteering-in-australia/>>, accessed 8 August 2016

^{xi} Mogilner, C., Chance, Z., & Norton, M.I. 2012, 'Giving Time Can Give You Time', *Psychological Science*, <<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2012/07/120713095402.htm>>, accessed 4 August 2016.

^{xii} Dahl, M. 2015, 'People Who Volunteer Are Happier with Their Work-Life Balance', *New York Mag*, 17 February 2015, <<http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2015/02/time-expanding-magic-of-volunteering.html>>, accessed 4 August 2016.

- ^{xiii} Borgonovi, F. 'Doing Well by Doing Good', op. cit., p. 2331.
- ^{xiv} Creer, K. 2006, 'Giving Up Your Time to Help Others Can Improve Health and Fitness. But New Research Has Found Volunteering Could Boost Your Love Life', *The Sunday Times: Body +Soul*, March 5 2006, p. 11.
- ^{xv} United Health Group, op. cit.
- ^{xvi} Sneed, R.S., Cohen, S. 2013, 'A Prospective Study of Volunteerism and Hypertension Risk in Older Adults', *Psychology and Aging*, vol. 28, no. 2, Jun 2013, pp.578-586, <<http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/pag/28/2/578>>, accessed 4 August 2016.
- ^{xvii} Tang, F. 2005, 'Socioeconomic Differentials in Late Life Volunteer Experience', PhD Thesis, Washington University, p. 4002, <<https://www.researchgate.net/publication>>, accessed 4 August 2016.
- ^{xviii} Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Policy Development. 2007, 'The Health Benefits of Volunteering: A Review of Recent Research', Washington, DC, p. 9, >
- ^{xix} Parsons, T. 2009, 'Brain benefit for seniors who volunteer,' Johns Hopkins University, 24 December 2009, <http://www.futurity.org/brain-benefit-for-seniors-who-volunteer/>, accessed 4 August 2016.
- ^{xx} Jenkinson, CE et al, op.cit.
- ^{xxi} Watson, C. 2012, 'Volunteering is so good for you that doctors should recommend it, experts say,' *Adelaide Now*, 30 September 2012, < <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news>>, accessed 4 August 2016.
- ^{xxii} Corporation for National and Community Service, 'The Health Benefits of Volunteering:' op. cit at page 11.
- ^{xxiii} Mayer, P. 2003, 'The Wider Economic Value of Social Capital and Volunteering in South Australia,' University of Adelaide, November 2003, <http://www.volunteerspirit.org/files/mayer_report.pdf>, accessed 4 August 2016.
- ^{xxiv} Gillan, K. 2014, 'Volunteering makes older adults happier and healthier,' *Nine MSN*, 1 September 2014, <<http://coach.ninemsn.com.au>>, accessed 4 August 2016.
- ^{xxv} Warburton, J. 2006, 'Volunteering in later life: is it good for your health', *Voluntary Action*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 3-15. <www.ivr.org.uk/evidence-bank/evidence-pages/Volunteering+in+later+life>
- ^{xxvi} Li, Y., Ferraro, K.F. 2006, 'Volunteering in Middle and Later Life: Is Health a Benefit, Barrier or Both?', *Social Forces*, vol. 85, no. 1, pp. 497-519, and Van Willigen, M. 2000, 'Differential Benefits of Volunteering Across the Life Course', *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, vol. 55B, no. 5, pp. S308-S318.
- ^{xxvii} Institute for Volunteering Research. 2003, 'Volunteering for Mental Health', Institute for Volunteering Research, <www.ivr.org.uk/evidence-bank/evidencepages/Volunteering+for+Mental+Health>, accessed 4 August 2016.
- ^{xxviii} Arnstein, P., Vidal, M., Well-Federman, C., Morgan, B., & Caudill, M. 2002, 'From Chronic Pain Patient to Peer: Benefits and Risks of Volunteering', *Pain Management Nurses*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 94-103, <<http://www.painmanagementnursing.org/>>, accessed 4 August 2016.
- ^{xxix} Sullivan, G. B., & Sullivan, M. J. 1997, 'Promoting Wellness in Cardiac Rehabilitation: Exploring the Role of Altruism', *Journal of Cardiovascular Nursing*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 43-52.
- ^{xxx} Corporation for National and Community Service, 'The Health Benefits of Volunteering,' op. cit. p. 10.
- ^{xxxi} Lum, T.Y. & Lightfoot, E. 2005, 'The Effects of Volunteering on the Physical and Mental Health of Older People', *Research on Aging*, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 31-55, and Luoh, M. C. & Herzog, A.R. 2002, 'Individual Consequences of Volunteer and Paid Work in Old Age: Health and Mortality', *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, vol. 43, no. 4, pp. 490-509.
- ^{xxxii} Musick, M., Herzog, A.R., & House, J.S. 1999, 'Volunteering and Mortality among Older Adults: Findings from a National Sample', *Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, vol. 54, no. 3, pp. S173-S180.
- ^{xxxiii} Ziersch, A.M., Baum, F. E. 2004, 'Involvement in civil society groups: Is it good for your health?', *Epidemiol Community Health*, vol. 58, pp. 493-500, <<http://jech.bmj.com/content/58/6/493.full>>, accessed 4 August 2016.
- ^{xxxiv} Windsor, T., Anstey, K. & Rodgers, B. 2008, 'Volunteering and Psychological Well-Being Among Young-Old Adults: How Much Is Too Much?' *The Gerontologist*, vol. 48, no. 1, pp. 59-70, <<http://gerontologist.oxfordjournals.org/content/48/1/59>>, accessed 4 August 2016.
- ^{xxxv} Paylor, J. 2011, 'Volunteering and health: evidence of impact and implications for policy and practice. A literature review,' *Institute for Volunteering Research*, p. 23, <<http://www.ivr.org.uk/images/stories/>>, accessed 4 August 2016.
- ^{xxxvi} Online forum viewed at <<http://forums.civfanatics.com/showthread.php?t=88404>>, accessed 4 August 2016.
- ^{xxxvii} News Medical, 2008, 'Too much volunteering bad for the health', 7 October 2008, <<http://www.news-medical.net/news/2008/10/07/41878.aspx>>, accessed 4 August 2016.
- ^{xxxviii} BBC News Online, 2004, 'Volunteering "bad for the health"', 14 May 2004, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk>>, accessed 4 August 2016.
- ^{xxxix} Warburton, op. cit.

^{xi} Irvine, C. 2009, 'Older People Volunteering: A Literature Review', Volunteer Development Agency, <www.volunteering-ni.org/pdf/Older_People_Literature_Review_2009.pdf>, accessed 4 August 2016.

^{xii} Lee, Y-J and Brudney, J. L. 2008, 'The impact of volunteering on successful ageing: a review with implications for programme design', *Voluntary Action*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 21-35, <www.ivr.org.uk/evidence-bank/evidencepages/The+impact+of+volunteering+on+successful+ageing>, accessed 4 August 2016.

^{xiii} Institute for Volunteering Research, op. cit.