

WHY BE A DONOR OR VOLUNTEER

Giving can inspire, transform you



KEVIN LEE

When the results of a study showing the link between giving and well-being were released on Monday, some asked: "What's new?" To them, it's intuitive, that giving time (volunteering), giving money (donating) or both is linked to happiness and satisfaction.

The study — done by the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) and Professor David Chan, a Lee Kuan Yew Fellow, Professor of Psychology and Director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute at Singapore Management University — found that among people who volunteered and/or donated, two-thirds were satisfied and happy with their lives. That is, they had high levels of subjective well-being (SWB).

Among non-givers, less than half had high SWB. The pattern of findings remained after taking income status into account.

But the findings of the Individual Giving Survey are not intuitive — because giving can be costly to the giver.

Giving money has opportunity costs. The money could have been spent on, say, entertainment, "shopping therapy" or a holiday. Some people sell their belongings to raise funds for charity.

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There might be a receipt for the donation made, perhaps a newsletter or annual report, but often little else to "show and tell" the donor how the money has helped someone else.

As for donor recognition, such as naming rights, if it happens, this is generally for larger amounts. Yet, there are donors of major gifts who give anonymously.

VOLUNTEERING NOT ALL SMILES

As for giving time, the volunteer activity may or may not be associated with happiness. For some volunteers, singing in a choir, reading to a child or teaching someone to play a sport makes them happy. For others, such as accountants, doctors, lawyers and board members, volunteering is like work, just that they receive neither fees nor salaries.

And for others still, the work might be something they would otherwise have avoided, such as cleaning cluttered, filthy, pest-ridden homes. The work might even be heartrending, with volunteers seeing poverty, misery, sickness and even death.

There are opportunity costs to volunteering too, in terms of time forgone which volunteers could have spent on themselves through rest, entertainment or family.

Volunteering sometimes even costs volunteers money.

For example, Food from the Heart

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volunteers not only spend their personal time delivering food, they also pay for their own transport costs such as petrol and parking.

The NVPC survey also found that almost all volunteers are donors. Sometimes, this happens when volunteers donate where they volunteer. For example, at Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital, volunteers have proposed activities such as outings for beneficiaries which they not only carry out, but may even bear the costs involved.

INSPIRE, TRANSFORM

So given the costs and sometimes blood, sweat and tears involved, why do people give?

We asked people in our Individual Giving Survey 2010 what motivated them most to volunteer with or donate to specific organisations.

The top response: To help a cause they personally believed in. Reasons such as attractiveness of the volunteer-raising/fund-raising effort hardly figured at all.

Many people, grateful for what they have, talk about "giving back". Others have said how volunteering is meaningful and time well-spent.

Giving inspires. Gerard Ee had accompanied his father Ee Peng Liang on many visits to voluntary welfare organisations.

Gerard said: "It was only natural for me to end up being an active volunteer myself. My siblings, too, are all very active volunteers and we inspire each other."

Giving transforms. As Eunice Olsen said of her volunteering experience at a girls' home: "There's nothing that beats knowing that you've made someone's day and that you've made a significant difference to someone's life ... It's not the same as doing well for your O-Levels or getting a huge paycheque. It's a level of satisfaction whereby when you feel it, you know it. And it stays with you for a long time."

Lionel Jonathan Louis, who had received care from Children-at-Risk Empowerment Association (CARE), said of his volunteering experience there: "When I was in Secondary One, CARE came to my school ... In my two years with CARE, I did really well in school, in life ... That's the reason I enjoy volunteering for CARE — I'm helping someone who may be going through what I went through."

Give. It inspires, it transforms. And that is really something to be happy about.