

The boost to mental health from volunteering

We are often flooded with self-care advice. What if helping others can make a difference?

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My first stint as a volunteer came in 2004 where I was rapidly recruited by my doctor friends to respond to the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami that killed over 200,000 people across multiple countries.

With no medical training other than an expired first aid certificate, I found myself in Sri Lanka, fumbling and tumbling to be of minimal assistance to a Singapore medical team that attended to the overwhelming numbers of injured. While I added no value to the medical care given to the survivors, I did find my small acts of simple service go a long way, whether it was simply helping with crowd control, getting a glass of water for a patient or sorting through boxes of medicines.

This volunteering experience, while intense, left me with a sense of purpose and a deeper perspective of myself and the world around me.

In a time when conversations about mental health have moved from the margins to the mainstream, many are asking: “What can I do to feel better?” From therapy and mindfulness to psychological intervention, art, exercise and being amid nature – the list of self-care strategies has never been longer. These methods focus on looking inwards, tending to one’s own needs.

But what if one key to mental well-being lies not only within ourselves, but in what we do for others? Could acts of service, those which are benevolent, consistent and meaningful, offer not only help to those in need, but have some form of benefit to the giver as well?

While any and all volunteering must in its very essence be founded in the motivation to

impart only good to the beneficiary without expectation of any compensation, material or intrinsic, the passionate work ethic and cheerful demeanour that I often see in many volunteers suggest to me there might be something gained, even as we each give freely of ourselves.

In my interactions with fellow volunteers, it is not uncommon to hear testimonials of those coming home enriched and inspired after spending weeks or months overseas sincerely serving in community development initiatives with long-term quantifiable impact. One young woman even credited an overseas service trip, and several subsequent trips thereafter, for helping her out of her chronic clinical depressive state.

THE IMPACT OF VOLUNTEERING ON THE VOLUNTEER

I have been privileged to have served in an international charity that is run and served largely by full-time volunteers. I was, and still am, deeply impressed at the levels of high staff engagement,



A volunteer leading exercises for seniors. One study found voluntary work may even reduce the mortality hazard of volunteers aged 65 and above. ST FILE PHOTO

low attrition and passionate service.

The work of this charity ranged from simple food distribution to vulnerable communities, to sailing the high seas on ships that were outfitted as medical clinics and operating theatres. This organisation made sure there was a place and role for every volunteer to serve impactfully.

These experiences have got me wondering if a positive volunteering experience, done with some regularity, could be a contributing activity towards overall well-being and even mental health.

While earlier studies exploring the impact of volunteering on a volunteer’s mental well-being have produced mixed results, these variations can be attributed to an interplay of many factors: age group, duration of

volunteering and reasons for participation.

A study by Singapore Management University’s Centre for Research on Successful Ageing (Rosa) in 2022 entitled “Volunteerism Among Older Adults in Singapore”, found some beneficial links between long-term volunteering and a volunteer’s mental well-being, particularly among older adults. Rosa’s study found that respondents who volunteered in the past year reported the highest levels of well-being, followed by those who had volunteered previously.

Other research also revealed that volunteering may lead to a stronger sense of community and connectedness, a reduction in symptoms of depression, a heightened sense of pride and empowerment, broader social

support networks; and greater overall life satisfaction. One study even found that voluntary work may even reduce the mortality hazard of volunteers aged 65 and above.

A BROADER SOCIAL IMPACT

Beyond the individual benefits, volunteering may also contribute to the overall good of society. The World Happiness Report 2024 by the Oxford Well-being Research Centre found that when society is more benevolent, the people who benefit most are those who are least happy. It also noted that increased pro-social behaviours such as volunteering are connected to decreasing deaths of despair around the world.

What these findings may collectively suggest is that acts of kindness, particularly volunteering, hold the potential not only to uplift the individual volunteer but also ripple outwards to strengthen communities and uplift those in need.

Today, it is more than heartening to see our government, academic institutions and corporations encourage volunteerism.

For example, Singapore Management University sees every undergraduate fulfil service stints, while companies increasingly offer leave for their staff to volunteer. Corporate Social Responsibility abounds, as well as ground-up initiatives with an estimated 450 activities islandwide.

As due consideration is given to strategies to tackle mental health challenges and improve overall well-being, one could consider giving of oneself outwardly, and perhaps, inwardly, find themselves better for it.

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