

Give and you will receive: why being kind to others makes you live longer

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There is a simple way to ensure you are happier, healthier and live longer. It doesn't involve hitting the gym and eating only vegetables, but it might prove the challenge of a lifetime for some.

If you bought more presents than you received this Christmas, then you've already got a head start. Because, in the words of Saint Francis of Assisi, "For it is in giving that we receive."

A new study has shown that altruism could be the key to a healthier existence. Researchers at Peking University in Beijing carried out three experiments – among cancer patients, healthy people who were having blood taken, and healthy people who donated money – and found that those who engaged in acts of kindness were less susceptible to pain.

The results were so pronounced that the study, published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, even recommended that kind acts "may supplement current therapies to treat pain".

If you're a recalcitrant Scrooge, perhaps it's time you had a dose of altruism. Not convinced? Here's why being a good person is the best medicine.

Kindness makes you happy

Giving has also been linked to the release of oxytocin, a hormone also released during sex and breast feeding that induces feelings of warmth, euphoria, and connection to others.

Doing nice things for others also boosts your serotonin, the neurotransmitter responsible for feelings of satisfaction and well-being.

Being happy makes you healthier

Releasing the hormone oxytocin in turn causes the release of a chemical called nitric oxide in blood vessels, which dilates (expands) the blood vessels. This reduces blood pressure. Hence why oxytocin is known as a 'cardioprotective' hormone – to lessen the strain on the heart.

Happiness is also associated with a range of lifestyle habits that are important for overall health. Happy people tend to eat healthier diets, with higher intakes of fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

It may also improve sleep habits and practices, which is important for concentration, productivity, exercise performance and maintaining a healthy weight. It can also help keep your immune system strong.

On the flip side, being unkind or stingy brings shame, which is linked to higher levels of stress. Long-term stress is bad for your health and can also encourage bad lifestyle habits like drinking and smoking.

Giving to charity is good for you

Like exercise, altruism also releases endorphins, a phenomenon known as a "[helper's high](#)." A 2006 study by the National Institutes of Health found that when people give to charities, it activates regions of the brain associated with pleasure, social connection, and trust, creating a "warm glow" effect.

Similarly, despite the participants' prediction that spending on themselves would make them happier, [a 2008 study](#) by Professor Michael Norton of the Harvard Business School found that giving money to someone else lifted participants' happiness more than spending it on themselves.

Even better, donate to charities that you care about

Norton also found that giving to a cause that specifies what they're going to do with your money leads to more happiness than giving to an umbrella cause where you're not so sure where your money is going.

Giving time is better than money

You don't have to have lots of spare change to cash in on the helper's high. In their book *Happy Money: The Science of Happier Spending*, prof Norton and co-author [Elizabeth Dunn](#), a psychology professor at the University of British Columbia, found what drives happiness is not money itself so much as the connection with another person that giving generates.

The perks of volunteering

Want to live longer? Then volunteer. A study of adults aged 57-85 published in the [Gerontologist](#) showed that "volunteering manifested the strongest association with lower levels of inflammation."

Inflammation in the body is associated with diabetes, cancer, chronic pain and obesity.

A 1999 study led by Doug Oman of the University of California, Berkeley, found that elderly people who volunteered for two or more organisations were 44 per cent less likely to die over a five-year period than non-volunteers.

Volunteering may also help lower stress levels, as seeing others in greater need helps keep your own problems in perspective.

Being rich doesn't make you *that* happy

As long as your basic needs are covered, evidence suggests that greater wealth doesn't make people any happier.

Research by Nobel laureates Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton suggests that the happiness benefits of increased income diminish around \$75,000 per year (Roughly £57,000). Probably because beyond that point having more money is unlikely to have a big impact on your ability to live comfortably.

Neither does inheriting money

If you're lucky enough to be a millionaire, then follow in the footsteps of Andrew Carnegie, and latterly Warren Buffett and Bill Gates, by giving your fortune away. It's the kindest thing you can do for your children.

Studies have shown that those who make money for themselves are happier than those who inherit or marry into it.

Being liked by other people is good for you

It's obvious, but when you're nicer to people, they're more inclined to like you. In turn this means they're more likely to let you into their emotional lives, and help you when you need help too.

Having empathy with others means we're more likely to have positive relationships and therefore interactions, which makes us happier.

Loneliness and social isolation is a killer. Feeling connected to others is a huge factor in keeping our bodies and minds in top form.

People who feel they belong to a group live longer, think clearer, and face a lower risk of heart disease than their lonelier counterparts. They're also less likely to feel depressed and anxious.

Kindness makes you more productive

Companies with a compassionate office culture where employees don't live in fear for their jobs have been shown to work more effectively. Employees are also physically healthier, and feel more motivated to pump out good work. A good argument for that four day week...

Last but not least, kindness is contagious

A dose of oxytocin can cause people to give more generously and to feel more empathy towards others, with "symptoms" lasting up to two hours.

A study by [Paul Zak](#), the director of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies at Claremont Graduate University, found that people on an "oxytocin high" can potentially jump-start a virtuous circle, where one person's generous behavior triggers another's.

Things to try

- A [loving Kindness Meditation](#)
- Give your fortune away: Initiatives like [Giving What We Can](#), help people to give at least 10pc of their income to effective charities.
- Text someone good morning or good night
- Start a piggy bank for a cause you care about
- Pay someone a compliment
- Leave a generous tip
- Ask an old person about their life
- Bake your colleagues a cake