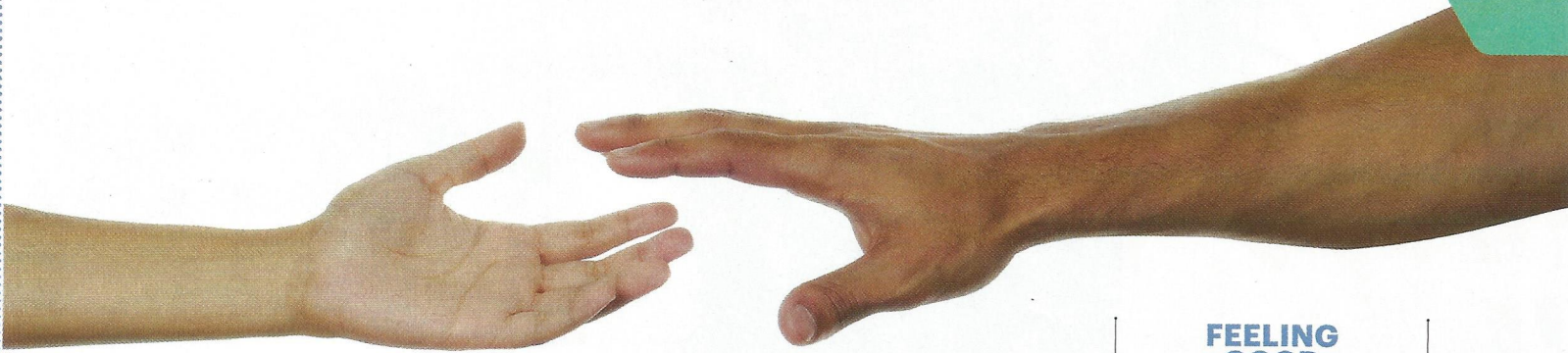




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LIVING HEALTHY



**WOMEN'S HEALTH**

# Help Wanted

RESEARCH SHOWS THAT VOLUNTEERING IS GOOD FOR YOUR HEALTH

*By Lisa Marshall*

● If you've ever served Thanksgiving dinner at a homeless shelter, rung the bell for the Salvation Army, or written a check to a favorite charity, you probably recall the calm glow of satisfaction social scientists call the "helper's high." But do such acts of generosity have lasting physical benefits?

Yes, says Stephen G. Post, PhD, a professor of preventive medicine at Stony Brook University and author of *The Hidden Gifts of Helping: How the Power of Giving, Compassion, and Hope Can Get Us Through Hard Times*. Recent studies show people who volunteer regularly have healthier hearts, less chronic pain, and bolstered immune systems. They battle addiction better and are less likely to suffer dementia with age. They also live longer. "The science is exploding," Post says. "We have begun to discover that there is something going on, physiologically, in this process of helping others that makes people not only feel happier but also report greater health."

As far back as 1988, an informal analysis of 1,700 female volunteers found that 68% reported a sense of calm after volunteering, akin to what they got from exercise. Decades later, studies used magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to track brain activity

to explain why. One NIH study of 19 people found that merely cutting a check to charity lights up the mesolimbic reward system (the same brain region that fires when we eat, have sex, or receive money), igniting a flood of dopamine and other feel-good chemicals. When that generosity is practiced face-to-face, levels of oxytocin (the calming hormone released when a mother nurses her infant) and pain-killing endorphins also rise, Post says.

Meanwhile, as we shift our minds away from our own troubles to focus on others' needs, levels of stress hormones like cortisol—long known to be hard on the cardiovascular system—fall. One 2013 study of 1,654 older adults found that those who volunteered at least 200 hours per year were 40% less likely to develop high blood pressure than non-volunteers.

An evolutionary reason may explain why our reward centers light up when we help someone else. Working in a team, Post and others say, could very well have helped us survive as a species. Some even suggest women's innate tendency to "tend and befriend" rather than fight or fly in times of crisis could, by buffering stress hormones, partially account for why women live longer than men.

## FEELING GOOD

HERE ARE THE BEST WAYS TO GET THE MOST OUT OF VOLUNTEERING, SAYS STEPHEN POST, PHD:

**Help others get through something you've gone through.**

Studies show recovering alcoholics are twice as likely to stay sober when they help other recovering alcoholics, and chronic pain sufferers see their pain decrease when they help someone with a similar condition.

**Do what you're good at.** When volunteers feel like they're just in the way, the experience can backfire and boost their stress. Choose a volunteer opportunity where you can make a real contribution.

**Mean it.** Those who contribute to organizations they're passionate about see stronger physiological responses. "Motivation matters," Post says. "When people are genuinely altruistic in their actions, they have a better response."

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