Helper's High: The Benefits (and Risks) of Altruism

Good deeds can relieve stress and help you live longer

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Source:

Altruism is most commonly thought of as a selfless act that benefits the recipient. However, the science behind good deeds suggests that altruism isn't entirely selfless. In fact, some research suggests that helpers may gain more from their altruistic acts than recipients.

Although there certainly can be downsides to being an active and passionate helper (i.e., increased stress, risk of burnout, frustration), there is a growing body of research that suggests that the upsides of altruism may outweigh the negatives (particularly if helpers go into it being mindful of the risks and taking steps to protect themselves from compassion fatigue).

Here are just a few of the ways that altruism can improve your attitude and make you healthier, happier, and less stressed:

- **Releases endorphins** - the positive energy that you feel from doing a good deed can act on your body in much the same way that exercise does, releasing endorphins that make you feel good naturally. That's why the "rush" that good deed-doers sometimes experience after performing an altruistic act is referred to as the "helper's high."
- **Feeling of satisfaction** - just because you're being altruistic doesn't mean that you can't or shouldn't feel good about it. You're making a difference in someone else's life and that *should* make you feel good. There is no reason to try to suppress that feeling or feel guilty about it. Think of it as a perk.
- **Helps you feel more grateful for what you have** - it's not unusual for people to experience a "grass is greener" feeling from time to time. However, because good deeds are often done for those who are going through a difficult time, the experience can serve to remind helpers that their own lives are actually pretty good. Sometimes, actually seeing what is on "the other side of the fence" can make you feel thankful for what you have.

- **Distracts you from your own problems** - focusing on someone else can actually pull you away from your own self-preoccupation and your own problems. In fact, studies have found that when people with medical conditions (e.g., cancer, chronic pain) "counsel" other patients with those same conditions, the "counselors" often experience less depression, distress, and disability.

- **Improves physical health** - research has discovered that helping others can not only improve your mental health, it also can improve your physical well-being. Studies have found that volunteers tend to live longer and often have better physical health than non-volunteers. (Of course, there are other variables associated with good deed-doers that may at least partially account for these findings. More research is being done to try to better understand all of the factors that may play a role.)

However, there is a caveat to all of this. Not everyone benefits from altruism. For example, for those who are already feeling overwhelmed by having too many things on their plate, adding more —even if the intentions are positive—is not likely to end well. This is particularly true for those individuals who have problems with time management.

Also, for those who tend to help the disadvantaged, it sometimes is that case that the sadness of the situations they get involved in has more of a negative than a positive impact on the helper. Some of this has to do with individual personalities, but a good rule of thumb for everyone is everything in moderation. Do what you can to help others, but be careful that you don't take on so much that it turns out that you become the one who needs help in the end.

Burnout among volunteers and those who work in helping professions is common. However, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, the risk can be lessened by being aware of the symptoms associated with burnout and compassion fatigue and by taking steps to take care of your own mental and physical health before trying to take care of others.