

Giving to Others Makes You Happy

By Dr. Mercola

Fewer than 1 in 3 Americans say they are very happy, according to The Harris Poll Happiness Index, which put their annual U.S. Happiness Index at a rather dismal 31 (out of 100) in 2016.¹ With so few having found their road to contentment, it may seem happiness is an unattainable, or at least an elusive, goal. In reality, small tweaks can add up when it comes to your feelings of happiness, and one of the first steps to take is one that is a win-win for everyone: being generous.

You may have been taught as a child that doing good deeds like giving to others is a kind and righteous choice. It turns out, however, that it benefits you just as much as the receiver. What's more, the act of doing good for others is so powerful that even just thinking about it may give your mood a boost. So if you're feeling down on your luck or are stuck in a funk — or even if you're struggling with a more serious dip in your mood — giving back to others may hold the key to turning your frown upside down.

Being Generous May Be the Key to Happiness

The study, conducted by researchers from the University of Zurich in Switzerland, started out rather simply. Fifty people were divided into groups and pledged to either spend money on themselves or on others. Over the next four weeks, functional magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans measured brain activity in regions associated with social behavior, generosity, happiness and decision-making.

The scans, as well as their choices, revealed that people who agreed to spend money on others made more generous choices as well as had stronger increases in self-reported happiness and more interactions in brain regions linked to altruism and happiness compared to those who agreed to spend money on themselves. What's more, the amount of money involved was not important.

Happiness increased whether the participants planned to give away a little bit of money or a lot. Lead author Philippe Tobler, associate professor of neuroeconomics and social neuroscience, told Time, "At least in our study, the amount spent did not matter ... It is worth keeping in mind that even little things have a beneficial effect — like bringing coffee to one's office mates in the morning."

Neural Link Between Generosity and Happiness Revealed

While it's been previously known that generous behavior may increase happiness, it may seem counterintuitive, since giving to others means you must sacrifice some of your own physical or emotional resources. But even though the decision to give can be costly, many people decide to do it anyway, perhaps because they anticipate the feel-good afterglow.

The study takes this knowledge a step further by revealing a neural link between the generosity and happiness, which may explain why charitable acts make people feel so good. The researchers explained in Nature Communications: "*We hypothesized that participants who had committed to spending their endowment on others would behave more generously in the decision-making task as well as self-report greater increases in happiness as compared to the control group. Importantly, we predicted that the neural link between generosity and happiness would involve functional interactions between brain regions engaged in generous behavior (TPJ) and those mediating happiness (ventral striatum).*"

The results confirmed our hypotheses. We found significantly higher levels of generous behavior and happiness, as reflected by greater TPJ activity for generous choices and generosity-related connectivity of the TPJ with striatal happiness regions in the experimental group. We thus conclude that the interplay of these brain regions links commitment-induced generosity with happiness."

Unfortunately, another study author — psychologist Soyoung Park of the University of Luebeck in Germany — told the Daily Mail that many people underestimate the link between generosity and happiness, and in fact assume the opposite — that they would become happier after spending money on themselves than others. Now that you know otherwise, you can put this pearl of wisdom to good use.

As Tobler added, "You don't need to become a self-sacrificing martyr to feel happier. Just being a little more generous will suffice."

Being Generous Doesn't Have to Cost Anything

If you're thinking that you can't afford to be generous monetarily speaking, you can still contribute to your community and reap the mood-boosting rewards of altruism via good deeds that don't cost a dime. Even a quick good deed, like letting someone go ahead of you in line at the grocery store, is beneficial, but if you have more time volunteering is also great for your mood.

Volunteering can lower your risk of depression and anxiety and even boost your psychological well-being. Not only does it keep you active and on your feet, but there's a definite social aspect as well, both of which contribute to happiness.

Volunteering to help others can even lead to a so-called "helper's high," which may occur because doing good releases feel-good hormones like oxytocin in your body while lowering levels of stress hormones like cortisol. Further, it also gives you a sense of purpose, which is beneficial for your health on multiple levels.

Aristotle taught that people of both modest means or great wealth can be generous, as virtuous generosity requires only that you give someone something without obligation or expectation of it being returned. In a report on Aristotle and generosity, the editor-in-chief of the American Journal of Orthodontics & Dentofacial Orthopedics explained: *"Although often considered in terms of money, generosity can also involve anything else that is useful, like the giving of time, respect, compliment, courtesy, encouragement, hope, laughter, applause, hospitality, kindness, service and forgiveness, all of which may have greater value than money."*

The same can be said of the provision of voluntary service to one's community and profession. Smiling at someone could be a virtuous act. Finding ways to contribute to another person's life could be an act of generosity."

A Sense of Purpose Helps Older Adults Sleep Better, Promotes Well-Being

Sleep problems are common among older adults and, if they become chronic, can lead to depression and other health problems, as well as poor mood. At the same time, feelings of unhappiness can easily keep you up at night, especially if you're unable to turn off your racing thoughts and tune out your negative emotions. Recent research from Northwestern University in Chicago, however, suggests that sleep quality can be improved in this population by having a higher level of meaning and purpose in life.

In addition to better sleep, those with a better sense of purpose were 63 percent and 52 percent less likely to be diagnosed with sleep apnea or restless leg syndrome, respectively. Separate research has also linked purpose in life to beneficial genetic expression, which perhaps explains why it's also linked, in turn, to greater use of preventive health care services and fewer nights spent hospitalized. One study even linked having a sense of purpose in life to reduced odds of suffering a stroke, and the link persisted even after adjusting for factors such as obesity, smoking, diabetes, blood pressure and lack of exercise. Happiness, too, is also about identifying and having a sense of purpose. The term "eudaimonic well-being" also originated with Aristotle and describes the form of happiness that comes from activities that bring you a greater sense of purpose, life meaning or self-actualization.

This could be your career or your family, or it could be gleaned from volunteering or even taking a cooking class. And here's something else to consider. Research showed that people whose sense of happiness was rooted in the eudaimonic camp had favorable gene-expression profiles, while hedonic well-being (characterized by happiness gleaned from pleasurable experiences, such as sex) produced gene profiles similar to those seen in people experiencing stress due to adversity.

Gratitude Is Another Tenet of Happiness

It's interesting that generosity breeds happiness, because the bearer of that generosity may then benefit not only from the generous act but also from feelings of gratitude related to it. Of course, you can

express gratitude without being the recipient of a generous act — but when it occurs in tandem it's an example of how happiness can snowball from one person to the next.

Like generosity, gratitude can produce measurable effects on a number of systems in your body, leading to better sleep, more positive emotions and more, including beneficial effects on:

Mood neurotransmitters (serotonin and norepinephrine)	Inflammatory and immune systems (cytokines)
Reproductive hormones (testosterone)	Stress hormones (cortisol)
Social bonding hormones (oxytocin)	Blood pressure and cardiac and EEG rhythms
Cognitive and pleasure related neurotransmitters (dopamine)	Blood sugar

If you want to enhance your well-being, then, it may be as simple as taking the time each day to reflect on what you're thankful for. Research showed that when study participants engaged in a gratitude intervention consisting of a gratitude diary and grateful reflection four times a week for three weeks it led to improvements in measures of depression, stress and happiness (a mindfulness intervention, consisting of a mindfulness diary and mindfulness meditation, led to similar improvements).

The Pleasurable Effects of Generosity Are Universal

Getting back to generosity, it can be a powerful tool to increase your well-being and, as mentioned, it doesn't have to cost anything to be generous with the people around you. A smile, a compliment, a good deed — all qualify as being generous.

It's a quality that virtually anyone can develop and benefit from, as research shows its "hedonic benefits ... are universal." Much of the research on the benefits of giving has been conducted in North America, so researchers tested it out in an isolated village in Vanuatu, a South Pacific Ocean nation.

Adults were asked to purchase candy for themselves or someone else, and those who purchased goods for others reported greater positive emotion. The same was true among 2- to 5-year-old children, who "displayed more happiness when giving treats away than when receiving treats themselves." Further, the children either had to give away their own treats or an experimenters' treats, and it turned out that they reaped the greatest emotional rewards when their giving was "costly," i.e., when they gave away their own candy.

Even before the age of 2, research has shown that toddlers experience happiness when giving. "Children are happier after engaging in costly giving — forfeiting their own resources — than when giving the same treat at no cost," researchers wrote. "By documenting the emotionally rewarding properties of costly prosocial behavior among toddlers, this research provides initial support for the claim that experiencing positive emotions when giving to others is a proximate mechanism for human cooperation."

No matter what your age, it's a tool worth using, and teaching to your children and grandchildren, not only to better the world around you but also to boost your own happiness. As I said from the start, being generous is a win-win proposition for everyone involved.

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