

# RESILIENCY

## VOLUNTEERING FOR LONG TERM HEALTH

In the warm summer months, we like to gather with friends and family to bring together those we love and spend meaningful time together. However, our smaller, personal communities are not the only ones that need attention. Larger communities—like our local neighborhoods and cities—also make efforts to bring people together to work toward a common goal through volunteering. Choosing to spend time helping others and making a difference is a meaningful way to spend your time, and it also has benefits for you as well.

Volunteering has been shown in several instances to have beneficial mental health effects for the volunteers, in addition to helping those you're aiming to help. The Mayo Clinic has identified six mental health benefits to volunteering:<sup>1</sup>

1. **Decreases risk of depression:** Especially for individuals ages 65 and older, research shows volunteering helps reduce depression risk by increasing social interaction and building support systems based on common interests.
2. **Gives a sense of purpose and teaches valuable skills:** The work provided by volunteers is essential to meeting everyday needs, for ourselves and others.
3. **Helps people stay physically and mentally active:** Volunteer activities get you moving and thinking at the same time. One study states that volunteers report better physical health than non-volunteers, and older volunteers report greater increases in life satisfaction.
4. **May reduce stress levels:** Savoring time spent servicing others produces a sense of meaning and appreciation, both given and received, which can have a stress-reducing effect.
5. **May help you live longer:** Individuals who volunteer have lower mortality rates than those who do not, according to the Longitudinal Study of Aging.
6. **Helps you meet others and develop new relationships:** Participating in a shared activity with others is one of the best ways to make new friends and strengthen existing relationships. Volunteering also expands your network and provides opportunities to develop social skills.

According to a 2012 study in the *Health Psychology Journal*, participants who regularly volunteered lived longer, but only if their intentions were truly to benefit others.<sup>2</sup> Although you can benefit from volunteering too, the ultimate goal is to help those in need. Check out your local food pantry, women's shelter, or environmental groups to see how you can get involved.

1. Mayo Clinic. Helping people, changing lives: The 6 health benefits of volunteering. 2017. Available at: <https://www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health/speaking-of-health/helping-people-changing-lives-the-6-health-benefits-of-volunteering>. Accessed May 17, 2021.
2. Watson S. Volunteering may be good for body and mind. 2013. Available at: <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/volunteering-may-be-good-for-body-and-mind-201306266428>. Accessed May 17, 2021.