

# Six Personal Benefits of Altruism

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*In this Wealth Planning Update:*

- » *People engage in altruistic activities to help others, but studies show that when done for the right reasons, the individual may experience significant benefits as well.*
- » *Benefits may include better health, reduced stress, increased levels of happiness, and even a longer life.*
- » *Volunteering and giving of resources help next generations think about social activity, thereby perpetuating altruism going forward.*

*“Our prime purpose in this life is to help others.” Dalai Lama*

There are many reasons why people give of their time and money. These reasons range from helping during a national or international crisis, past charitable experiences, a sense of duty or obligation, a desire to build a family legacy, and sometimes, even a fear of saying “no.” There are benefits, including recognition, naming rights, and community appreciation. Yet, are there any benefits if giving is done anonymously with no social or financial benefits and just for the purpose of helping someone else? In other words, does pure altruism include tangible benefits? Is altruism truly selfless?

There is no shortage of information stating that altruism can be selfless. Daniel Batson, who has devoted his career to the study of altruism states, “Altruism is a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another’s welfare.”<sup>1</sup> This can include feeding the hungry or giving access to educational resources allowing someone to help themselves. However, being altruistic doesn’t mean that you are not allowed to benefit from your generosity. This Wealth Planning Update outlines how your altruistic actions may have personal benefits, not just for the recipient of your generosity but for your health and overall happiness level.

## **The many benefits of a “helper’s high”**

Have you ever volunteered your time or given a gift that made you feel really good? Perhaps you experienced a sense of happiness or a renewed sense of energy. The powerful physical feeling that comes as a result of helping others has been called the “helper’s high.”<sup>2</sup> That good feeling is not just about how good you feel after giving of your time or money. Your altruistic actions may have a longer-lasting effect on your overall health and happiness. You might experience one or more of the following potential benefits of altruism:

<sup>1</sup> Batson, C. Daniel and Shaw, Laura L., “Evidence for Altruism: Toward a Pluralism of Prosocial Motives.” *Psychological Inquiry* 2, no. 2 (1991): 107-22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1449242>.

<sup>2</sup> Luks, Allan, “The Healing Power of Doing Good: The Health, and Spiritual Benefits of Helping Others.”

### 1. Enjoy better health

A study conducted by Allan Luks found that weekly helpers who also had personal contact with those they helped were 10 times more likely to say they were in good health compared to those that volunteered once a year.<sup>3</sup> Luks connects the helper's high to better health as a result of endorphins being released into the bloodstream, showing a link between giving and pleasure.

### 2. Reduce stress

According to Luks, helping others, particularly those who are strangers to us, can lower stress levels, resulting in better health. Another report found that those who had volunteered at least 200 hours in the 12 months prior to baseline testing were less likely to develop hypertension than nonvolunteers. Volunteering at least 200 hours was also associated with greater increases in psychological well-being.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Live longer

Giving of yourself to help others can apparently lead to living a longer life as long as your giving includes involvement in a volunteer organization. An American Psychological Association Journal Health Psychology study found that volunteering may lead to living longer when the reason for volunteering is to help others (other-oriented) rather than themselves (self-oriented). Researchers concluded, "We found that respondents who volunteered for other-oriented reasons experienced reduced mortality risk relative to nonvolunteers but respondents who volunteered for more self-oriented reasons had a similar risk of mortality as nonvolunteers. This analysis clearly demonstrates the importance of motives in determining health outcomes with respect to volunteering."<sup>5</sup>

### 4. Experience higher levels of happiness

Studies show that once we earn enough to meet our general needs, more money does not lead to greater happiness but charitable giving can impact personal happiness. In a study conducted by the co-author of "Happy Money: The Science of Smarter Spending," which focuses on the connection of money and happiness, researchers asked individuals to rate their general happiness and report their income, personal spending, and prosocial spending. They found that personal spending was unrelated to happiness but higher prosocial spending was associated with significantly higher levels of happiness. Their conclusion was that how people spend their money may be as important as how much they make and "that spending money on others might represent a more effective route to happiness than spending money on oneself."<sup>6</sup>

### 5. Make connections

While helping others can make you happy, one study shows that "helping others may be most emotionally rewarding when it satisfies the fundamental need for social connection." Participants in a study were given a Starbucks gift card. Some were told to use the card to take a person out for coffee; others were told to give the card away; and the rest were told to use the cards for themselves. At the end of the day, the people who used the gift cards to benefit someone else and spent time with that person at Starbucks were the

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<sup>3</sup> Luks, Allan. Psychology Today (October 1988)

<sup>4</sup> Sneed, R.S. and Cohen, S. "A Prospective Study of Volunteerism and Hypertension Risk in Older Adults" <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3804225/>

<sup>5</sup> Konrath, Sara, Fuhrel-Forbis, Andrea, Lou, Alina, and Brown, Stephanie, "Motives for Volunteering Are Associated with Mortality Risk in Older Adults." 2011 American Psychological Association.

<sup>6</sup> Dunn, Elizabeth W., Aknin, Lara B., and Norton, Michael I, "Spending Money on Others Promotes Happiness" Science 319, no. 5870 (March 2008) 1687-88

## Wealth Planning Update

happiest.<sup>7</sup> As you think about your charitable giving, investing your charitable dollars in ways that help you connect directly with the people you are helping may provide an additional boost in happiness.

### 6. Promote generosity in children

If you want to teach your children generosity and reap the benefits that have been outlined, then they need role models whom they respect to show them the way. The Making Caring Common project, with a goal of helping parents, educators, and communities raise caring, kind, and respectful kids, found in a study that 80% of the youth said their parents were more concerned with their grades or happiness than whether they cared for others. The youth interviewed were three times more likely to agree with the statement, “My parents are prouder if I get good grades in my classes than if I’m a caring community member in class and school.”<sup>8</sup> As you engage in altruistic activities, find ways to share with your family what you are doing and/or include them in your giving. This will help the next generation be prepared to identify social issues and have the tools to be prepared to address and solve these issues.

### Summary

Although everyone’s philanthropic journey is unique, its foundation is based on the desire to help others. Although selfless in nature, altruism does come with some great benefits. Giving of your time, talent, treasure, and influence on a regular basis may increase the chances of improved health, a longer life, a higher level of happiness, and feeling connected. In addition, it offers the satisfaction of being a role model for the next generation to be more generous, which perpetuates altruism going forward.

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<sup>7</sup> Dunn, Elizabeth W., Aknin, Lara B., and Norton, Michael I, “Prosocial Spending and Happiness: Using Money to Benefit Others Pays Off.” <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.instrepos:11189976>

<sup>8</sup> <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu> “The Children We Mean to Raise: The Real Messages Adults Are Sending About Values”