

# Why Generosity is Good for YOU!

By Lisa Firestone, Ph.D.

Generosity is no longer the selfless act we've long thought it to be. Studies now suggest that one of the biggest benefactors of generosity is the person who is dishing it out.

Like a healthy diet, exercise, and good genes, generosity may increase your life span. A 2003 research study at the University of Michigan reveals that the positive effects of generosity include improving one's mental and physical health and promoting longevity. In another Michigan study, which traced 2,700 people over 10 years, researchers found that men who did regular volunteer work had death rates 2.5 times lower than men who didn't. Generosity can help reduce stress, support one's physical health and enhance one's sense of purpose.



So what is it about generosity that makes it so vital to a happy and healthy life? First, it's important to note that the form of generosity that most benefits us isn't measured in a dollar amount or a physical gain. What matters is the sensitivity we offer another person. The more directly we see our personal efforts impact someone else, the more we gain from the experience of giving.

The second direct benefit we gain from giving is that generosity inherently shifts our focus off of ourselves. While it's important to maintain a healthy level of self-awareness and sensitivity to oneself, often the focus we put on ourselves is filtered through a negative lens. Many of our thoughts about ourselves are tinged with criticism, stress, doubt, uncertainty and obsession, none of which do any good for our level of confidence and success.

People often mistakenly assume that being self-centered means being egotistical or vain. However, being self-centered can mean spending too much time listening to a "critical inner voice" inside our heads that critiques our every move and tells us we are failing in one or another area of our lives. Generosity distracts us from the scathing insults of this inner voice while creating quite a strong argument against it. It is difficult to prove we are worthless when we are watching someone else benefit from our actions.

Generosity is a natural confidence builder and a natural repellent of self-hatred. Not only does it make us feel better about ourselves, but it actively combats feelings of isolation and depression. People who battle depression have been shown to benefit from volunteering, as it gives them a sense of value and purpose while placing them in a social environment.

For example, a friend of mine was devastated by a break-up between him and his girlfriend of many years. The break up left him lacking in a sense of security, mutual friends, and a daily sense of self. His plummet into depression made him lethargic and demoralized. Setting his pain aside, he decided to spend some time volunteering at a senior center.

Within a short time, the few hours a week he spent reading aloud to people living in the senior center helped him to recognize his value. Not only that, he began to rebuild his social network as he made friends with staff members and fellow volunteers. Little by little and piece by piece, he was able to get his whole life together and regain his sense of happiness and fulfillment. The social networks that are forged through living a generous life are vast, rich and often have a deeper meaning to us.

In being generous, the sensitivity that we feel toward another person allows us to be more sensitive to ourselves and to give ourselves more value. A study of children found that when kids were offered praise without doing anything to warrant it, their self-esteem was unaffected. Conversely, when kids were praised for actual acts, such as generosity, their self-esteem was enhanced. The same principle holds true for all of us. Being built up with compliments has little effect on our self-worth, whereas the gratification of being generous enhances our sense of self. Furthermore, when we are in a giving state, we are more relaxed, attuned, and living in the moment. This state of being is contagious; people who are generous often create a snowball effect in others who in turn want to pay it forward.

Though consciously we may fail to see a downside to living an altruistic life, and we readily applaud acts of generosity in others, many of us fail to embrace generosity's fundamental second step: allowing others to be generous to us. Those of us who have been taught to give without asking for anything in return feel ashamed or embarrassed at being given a hand. However, accepting generosity toward us is an important part of allowing ourselves to experience the many benefits of leading a giving life. It's truly the give and take that brings us our greatest sense of joy.

As the holiday seasons commences, most of us inevitably begin to speed up and kick into action, throwing ourselves into end-of-the-year activities and planning our resolutions to improve ourselves in the upcoming year. Yet, what we tend to overlook is that by actually slowing down, focusing outward and noticing what other people need, we are often doing ourselves a real service by engaging in the one activity that will dramatically improve the quality of our lives.

*About Lisa Firestone, Ph.D.*

***Dr. Firestone is the Director of Research and Education at The Glendon Association. An accomplished and much requested lecturer, Dr. Firestone speaks at national and international conferences in the areas of couple relations, parenting, and suicide and violence prevention. Dr. Firestone has published numerous professional articles, and most recently was the co-author of Sex and Love in Intimate Relationships (APA Books, 2006), Conquer Your Critical Inner Voice (New Harbinger, 2002), and Creating a Life of Meaning and Compassion: The Wisdom of Psychotherapy (APA Books, 2003).***