

Volunteering Makes Us Vital

Mary was not merry in December or in any other month of 2002. She felt stressed, anxious, and depressed. Each morning before getting out of bed she mentally rehearsed her long list of things to get done. Most mornings she just wanted to pull the covers over her head.

Life has changed for Mary. Now she feels feisty and joyful despite being diagnosed with breast cancer in January of 2003. She attributes her vitality to an unexpected opportunity to mentor others.

Mary's chance came after her treatment when she agreed to help others with breast cancer by talking to them once a week – offering them comfort, empathy, and hope. She's continued her volunteer work for two years and has never felt happier.

Stories like Mary's compress into mounds of studies and statistics largely compiled by the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love. According to the research human beings seem biologically wired to give love; we get a "helper's high" after serving others. Volunteering makes us happier than having good looks, wealth, or education.

Helping seems to make us not only happy but also healthy. Over two thousand older California residents were studied, those who regularly volunteered for two or more organizations had a 63 percent lower mortality than nonvolunteers. Volunteering had a larger effect than exercising four times a week.

Stephen Post, author of *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*, writes "If you're an older adult, I have one recommendation: volunteer!... Giving protects overall health twice as much as aspirin protects against heart disease."

Opportunities for volunteering in most areas are abundant. Make service an adventure and choose those places that call to you – possibly tutoring an adult, being a lunch buddy at an elementary school, or pulling up noxious weeds. A ninety-seven year old lady I met at a YWCA function says she enjoys cheering up old people at the hospital. Limiting your service to an hour or so a week will keep you at peak performance. The volunteering impact is strongest at forty hours per year.

Many are reaping personal benefits and making a dramatic impact on society through volunteering. During this season of giving, do good for its own reward – and keep doing it even if it is good for you.

How might you move up to the good life by volunteering?