



Philanthropy- Dirty Little Secrets

On this day of gratitude, we feel the need to confess our little secret. We have led you to believe that you should commit to philanthropy to help your fellow citizen, to live in a better community, and to support the local economy. But it's time we tell you the truth. Philanthropy is not just about giving to others. In fact, the health benefits of giving might make it appealing to the biggest Scrooge among us.

First, giving has recognized benefits to your health and longevity. Researchers at University of Michigan followed over 400 senior couples over a five-year period. People who did not provide support to others were more than twice as likely to die in the five years as those who helped spouses, friends, relatives and neighbors by giving of their time and talent. The researchers controlled for a variety of factors including functional health, health satisfaction, health behaviors (such as smoking and sedentary behavior), mental health, age, income and education level.

Similarly, in a study from Carnegie Mellon University, adults over 50 who volunteered at least 200 hours in the past year (four hours per week) were 40 percent less likely to develop high blood pressure than non-volunteers. This outcome was not limited to adults. In a study of students at a Vancouver high school they found that students who spent an hour a week helping children in after-school programs over 10 weeks had lower levels of inflammation and cholesterol, plus a lower body mass index.

Second, giving makes you feel happy. In a working paper, Harvard researchers report that "At the most basic level, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) evidence shows that giving money to charity leads to similar brain activity in regions implicated in the experience of pleasure and reward. In a study conducted by Harbaugh, Mayr, and Burghart (2007) neural activity was recorded while participants decided how to split a one-hundred-dollar sum between themselves and a local food bank. Results showed that donations of the original one-hundred-dollar sum to the food bank led to activation in the ventral striatum, a brain region associated with representing the value of a range of rewarding stimuli, from cocaine to art to attractive faces." The happiness benefits are not limited to gifts of money, however, researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky, of the University of California, Riverside found similar effects when she

assigned people to perform random acts of kindness over a period of six weeks. Safer than cocaine and less expensive than fine art, there might be more to giving than, well, giving.

Third, philanthropy reduces social isolation and increases feelings of connectedness. Volunteering provides ongoing opportunities for social engagement with like-minded peers. Giving of your time and money has also been shown to trigger the release of oxytocin- the brain chemical that creates warm feelings associated with attachment. In addition, according to researchers at University of California, Berkeley, when you give, people perceive you more favorably and, unexpectedly, you perceive others more favorably. These perceptions encourage additional pro-social behavior toward your community and back to you. This social engagement seems to contribute to mental wellbeing and physical health- potentially even reducing the risk of developing chronic disease and dementia.

It feels good to get that off our chests. If you decide you want to give for all the wrong reasons, we promise not to tell a soul.

To share how you have been impacted by philanthropy, as a donor, volunteer, or recipient of services, email info@cnsierra.com, and you could be featured in a future article.

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