

Study finds it actually is better (and healthier) to give than to receive

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A five-year study by researchers at three universities has established that providing tangible assistance to others protects our health and lengthens our lives.

This, after more than two decades of research failed to establish that the same benefits accrue to the recipients of such help.

Principal investigator Michael J. Poulin, PhD, assistant professor of psychology at the University at Buffalo, says, "This study offers a significant contribution to the research literature on the relationship between [social environment](#) and health, and specifically to our understanding of how giving assistance to others may offer [health benefits](#) to the giver by buffering the negative [effects of stress](#)."

Poulin, along with colleagues at Stony Brook University and Grand Valley State University, produced the study, "Giving to Others and the Association Between Stress and Mortality," which was posted online Jan. 17 by the [American Journal of Public Health](#), which will publish the study in an upcoming print issue.

The authors point out that although it is established that [social isolation](#) and stress are significant predictors of mortality and morbidity, 20 years of studies and meta-analytical review have failed to establish that receiving social support from others buffers recipients against mortality after exposure to psychosocial stress.

"As the title of our study indicates," Poulin says, "we tested the hypothesis that providing help to others would predict a reduced association between stress and mortality for the helpers. Specifically, over the five years of the study, we found that when dealing with [stressful situations](#), those who had helped others during the previous year were less likely to die than those who had not helped others," he says.

The study's 846 subjects, all from the Detroit, Mich., area, completed baseline interviews that assessed [stressful events](#) they had experienced in the previous year and whether they had provided tangible assistance to friends or family members in the past year.

Self-reported stressful experiences included such things as serious, non-life-threatening illness, burglary, job loss, financial difficulties or death of a family member.

Respondents also reported the total amount of time in the past 12 months they had spent helping friends, neighbors or relatives who did not live with them by providing transportation, doing errands and shopping, performing housework, providing child care and other tasks.

"When we adjusted for age, baseline health and functioning and key psychosocial variables," Poulin says, "the Cox proportional hazard models (the most widely used method of survival analysis) for mortality revealed a significant interaction between helping behavior, stressful events, morbidity and mortality.

"Our conclusion," he says, "is that helping others reduced mortality specifically by buffering the association between stress and mortality.

"These findings go beyond past analyses to indicate that the health benefits of helping behavior derive specifically from stress-buffering processes," Poulin says, "and provide important guidance for

understanding why [helping behavior](#) specifically may promote health and, potentially, for how social processes in general may influence [health](#)."

Poulin's co-authors are Stephanie L. Brown and Dylan M. Smith, associate professors of preventive medicine, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, N.Y., and Amanda J. Dillard, assistant professor of psychology, Grand Valley State University, Allendale, Mich.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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