

Giving support to others—not just receiving it—has beneficial effects

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Social support has well-known benefits for physical and mental health. But giving support—rather than receiving it—may have unique positive effects on key brain areas involved in stress and reward responses, suggests a study in *Psychosomatic Medicine: Journal of Biobehavioral Medicine*, the official journal of the American Psychosomatic Society.

"These results add to an emerging literature suggesting that support giving is an overlooked contributor to how [social support](#) can benefit health," according to the report. The lead researchers were Tristen Inagaki, PhD, of University Pittsburgh and Naomi Eisenberger, PhD, of University of California, Los Angeles.

When it Comes to Support, It May Be Even Better to Give than to Receive

The study included 36 subjects from a larger study of the "neural mechanisms" of social support—in other words, the changes within the brain that may explain the reduction in stress and other health-promoting effects of support.

Participants were asked about whether they gave or received support—for example, having "someone to lean on" or "looking for ways to cheer people up" when they are feeling down. Consistent with previous studies, "Both receiving and giving more support were related to lower reported negative psychosocial outcomes," Drs. Inagaki,

Eisenberger and colleagues write.

The researchers then performed a series of neuroimaging tasks to explore how brain areas involved in stress-, reward-, and caregiving-related activity were affected by giving versus receiving social support. The studies used a technique called [functional magnetic resonance imaging \(fMRI\)](#), which can show activation of specific brain areas in response to different types of tasks.

In all three areas studied, fMRI scans showed brain activation that correlated with individual differences in giving support, but not receiving it. For example, while performing a stressful mental math task, participants who reported giving the most support had reduced activation in [brain areas](#) related to stress responses. In contrast, receiving a lot of support was unrelated to activation in stress-related regions.

Giving higher levels of support was also linked to increased activity in a brain area that functions as part of the reward system during an "affiliative" task, in which subjects looked at pictures of loved ones; and during a "prosocial" task, in which subjects had a chance to win money for someone in need.

The findings question the conventional idea that the [health benefits](#) of social support mainly reflect received support. "At the level of the brain, only support giving was associated with beneficial outcomes," according to Drs. Inagaki, Eisenberger and coauthors. They believe that giving support might improve health by "reducing activity in stress-and threat-related regions during stressful experiences."

Giving support might avoid the sometimes harmful effects of receiving support—for example, if it doesn't match the person's preferences or leaves him/her feeling indebted. "Giving support, on the other hand, allows an individual to control when and how support is given...[and]

may result in more effective stress reduction," the researchers write.

Taken together, the findings are consistent with the overall health benefits of social support for mental and physical health—but also suggest that giving support may be at least as important as receiving it. Drs. Inagaki, Eisenberger and colleagues conclude, "Gaining a full understanding of how and why social ties are so important to well-being requires the consideration of both the [support](#) that is received and given."

More information: [journals.lww.com/psychosomatic ...
Receiving.98984.aspx](https://journals.lww.com/psychosomatic/Receiving.98984.aspx)

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