

Volunteering later in life can enhance mental health and wellbeing

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Becoming a volunteer later on in life can result in good mental health and wellbeing, according to researchers from the University of Southampton and the University of Birmingham.

However, the study which is published in the *BMJ Open* online, found these effects did not apply before the age of 40, suggesting that the association with [volunteering](#) may be stronger at certain points of the life course. The results also point to the need for further efforts to engage middle aged and older people in volunteering activities.

Researchers from the Southampton Statistical Sciences Research Institute and Birmingham's Third Sector Research Centre reviewed over 66,000 responses by British adults to questions posed through the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), now part of the UK Household Longitudinal Study called Understanding Society.

The original Survey, which ran between 1991-2008, asked a range of questions on leisure time activities including the extent of formal volunteering. The Survey also included a validated proxy indicating mental health/emotional wellbeing known as GHQ-12.

Around 21% of respondents said they had carried out some kind of formal volunteering activity with women tending to volunteer more than men.

Across the entire sample, the average GHQ score was the best (lowest)

among those who were frequent volunteers and worst (highest) among those who never volunteered.

When age was factored in by the research team, the positive association between volunteering and good mental health and emotional wellbeing became apparent at around the age of 40 and continued up into old age (80+).

"Voluntary action might provide those groups with greater opportunities for beneficial activities and social contacts, which in turn may have protective effects on health status," said Dr Faiza Tabassum, Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Southampton. "Particularly, with the ageing of the population, it is imperative to develop effective health promotion for this last third of life, so that those living longer are healthier."

The researchers found that those who had never volunteered had lower levels of emotional wellbeing, starting at midlife and continuing into old age compared with those who did volunteer.

Previous research has indicated that volunteering in older age is associated with better mental and physical health, but it was unclear whether this extends to other [age](#) groups until now.

Dr Tabassum added: "Volunteering may also provide a sense of purpose, particularly for those people who have lost their earnings, because regular volunteering helps contribute to the maintenance of social networks, and this is especially the case for older people who often live in isolation."

The findings held true even after taking account of a range of potentially influential factors, including marital status, educational attainment, and social class. The researchers were not able to gauge the extent of

'informal' volunteering, such as helping out neighbours so couldn't capture the full spectrum of voluntary activities.

"Precisely how opportunities for engagement in volunteering can be provided and sustained is a considerable challenge at the present time, because of the pressures of austerity, while the distribution of voluntary organisations means that opportunities to participate are not always available everywhere," said Professor John Mohan, Deputy Director of the Third Sector Research Centre at the University of Birmingham. "But this study does suggest that we should pay attention to the diversity of experience of people across their life course, and not just uncritically assume that volunteering has benefits for everyone, everywhere."

More information: Association of volunteering with mental well-being: a life course analysis of a national population based longitudinal study in the UK, *BMJ Open*, [DOI: 10.1136/bmjopen-2016-011327](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2016-011327)

Provided by University of Southampton

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