

Volunteering would feel good even if it didn't have health benefits. But it does

July 24 2024, by Albert Stumm



Jeff Kellert stands in his garden at his home in Albany, N.Y. on June 20, 2024. Kellert began volunteering as a tutor and helped with monthly dinners at his synagogue. The experience keeps him active, but just as important, he said, it has led to new friendships and a sense of purpose he never expected in retirement. Credit: Robert Piechota via AP

After retiring from 35 years as a teacher, Jeff Kellert began volunteering as a tutor and helped with monthly dinners at his synagogue.

Later, he got certified to lead [support groups](#) every other week for the National Mental Health Alliance, an organization for relatives of people with mental illness.

Altogether, Kellert, 71, volunteers about 30 hours a month. The experience keeps him active, but just as important, he said, it has led to new friendships and a sense of purpose he never expected in retirement.

"That together with a good sense of self-esteem and [self-confidence](#)—I feel like I'm doing something productive," said Kellert, of Albany, New York. "Retirement's not what it used to be, sitting on your rocking chair knitting. It's so much more."

Volunteering also may help him live longer, providing what various studies have shown are a variety of health and psychological benefits.

Jacquelyn Stephens, a developmental-health psychologist at the nonprofit Mather Institute, in Evanston, Illinois, researches how to age well. She said volunteering would be good even if it didn't have so many benefits.

"But it just so happens that it does, and especially for [older adults](#)," she said.

The health benefits of volunteering

Eric S. Kim, a [psychology professor](#) at the University of British Columbia Vancouver, said his research has found a connection between volunteering and more [positive emotions](#), less loneliness and more [social support](#).

"These things have downstream effects, such as increased healthy behaviors, as well as increased healthier [biological function](#) such as reduced inflammation," said Kim.



Bella McGowan, right, works at a community garden with local residents Rico De Rixey, center, and his wife Geraldine Brand, Thursday, April 13, 2023, in Los Angeles. McGowan, a master gardener and horticultural therapist, started volunteering four years ago after retiring from her job as a school psychologist. Credit: AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File

It's not just older adults who benefit, though they are the most-studied group. There are indications that volunteering helps high school students too.

Stephens noted that some types of volunteer opportunities, like loading boxes at a [food bank](#), include physical activity. But the work doesn't have to be physical to be beneficial, she said.

"It's kind of like [exercise](#), that the best kind of volunteering is the one you'll actually do," she said, noting that the only risk is overcommitting, which would negate health benefits. "It's not good to be stressed out about your volunteer commitment."

How to get started volunteering

Stephens said many people might not volunteer because at first they only think of a few common options that don't appeal to them, like tutoring or providing food to the needy. Instead, she suggested reaching out to your social network to learn about opportunities that others have enjoyed.

Doing so helps to vet an organization for a good environment for volunteers, and encourages people to get involved with a friend or relative in ways that deepen their bonds.

Other good places to start are [AmeriCorps](#) and aggregator websites such as [VolunteerMatch](#), which pairs a person's skills with opportunities in their area.

Kellert recommended simply searching online for "volunteer opportunities in my town," but he also suggested doing a little soul searching before you retire.

"A lot of the time it's right in front of you," he said. "What do you love? What do you want to do? And now you can do that."

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