

Want to do something good for your health? Try being generous

30 November 2015, by Ashley Whillans



Helping out. Credit: ccbarr/Flickr, CC BY-SA

Every day, we are confronted with choices about how to spend our money. Whether it's thinking about picking up the tab at a group lunch or when a charity calls asking for a donation, we are faced with the decision to behave generously or not.

Research suggests that spending [money](#) on others can [improve happiness](#), but can it also improve your physical health?

There is some evidence that donating time can improve physical health, but no one has looked at whether donating money has the same effect.

So my colleagues and I at the University of British Columbia decided to conduct [an experiment](#) to find out if spending money on others could lower [blood pressure](#), which [will be published](#) in the journal *Health Psychology* in December.

Helpful people might be healthier

A 1999 study examining whether volunteering had an effect on mortality [provided initial evidence](#) for an association between helping others and

physical health. In the study, adults age 55 and older reported how many organizations they helped, how many hours they spent volunteering, and then underwent a [physical exam](#).

Researchers controlled for several factors, including how healthy participants were when the study began and their available social support. After five years the adults who reported providing more help to others were 44% more likely to be alive.

In a more recent study, researchers measured blood pressure and volunteering once at baseline and again four years later. They found evidence that older adults who volunteered at least four hours per week in the 12 months prior to the baseline blood pressure measurement were [less likely to develop high blood pressure](#) four years later.

Additional studies suggest that volunteering is associated with greater physical health in part because volunteering helps to [buffer against stress](#) and [prevents against declines](#) in functional health, such as declines in walking speed and physical strength.

So does being helpful *cause* better health?

It might seem simple – helping is good for your health. But so far, most research studying the health benefits of helping have been correlational. These studies cannot determine whether helping others actually *causes* improvements in physical health or just happens to be related to it.



Give a little. Credit: www.shutterstock.com

Also, most research has focused on the health benefits of [volunteering](#) one's time. As it turns out, people think about time and money in vastly different ways. For example, whereas [thinking about time](#) leads people to [prioritize social connections](#), thinking about money can lead people [to distance themselves](#) from others.

It remains unclear whether the benefits of generosity extend to donating money. Our [latest work](#) provides the first empirical evidence that this decision might also have clinically relevant implications for physical health.

Can spending money on others lower blood pressure?

We gave 128 older [adults](#) (ages 65-85) US\$40 a week for three weeks. Half of our participants were randomly assigned to spend the money on themselves and half were told to spend it on others. We told participants to spend their \$40 payment all in one day and to save the receipts from the purchases they had made.

We measured participants' blood pressure before, during, and after they spent their study payments. We chose to examine blood pressure in this study because we can measure it reliably in the lab, and because high blood pressure is a significant health outcome – having chronically elevated blood pressure (hypertension) is responsible for [7.5](#)

[million premature deaths each year](#).

What did we find? Among participants who were previously diagnosed with high blood pressure (N=73), spending money on others significantly reduced their blood pressure over the course of the study. Critically, the magnitude of these effects was comparable to the benefits of interventions such as anti-hypertensive medication and exercise.

The participants who were previously diagnosed with high blood pressure, and who were assigned to spend money on themselves, showed no change in blood pressure during the study. As expected, for people who didn't have high blood pressure, there was no benefit from spending money on others.

Whom you spend money on matters

Interestingly, we found tentative evidence that how people spent their money mattered for promoting the benefits of financial generosity. People seemed to benefit most from spending money on others they felt closest to. This finding is consistent with previous research from our lab showing that people [derive the most satisfaction](#) from [spending money](#) on others when they splurge on close friends and family.

For instance, the first participant in our study was a war veteran. He donated his payments to a school built in honor of a friend he had served with in the Vietnam War. Another participant donated her payments to a charity that had helped her granddaughter survive anorexia.

Of course, there is still a lot to learn about when and for whom the health benefits of financial generosity emerge.

For example, we don't know a lot about how or how much people should spend on others to enjoy long-lasting health benefits. Indeed, research suggests that the [positive benefits of new circumstances can disappear quickly](#). Thus, to sustain the [health benefits](#) of financial generosity, it might be necessary to engage in novel acts of financial generosity, while prioritizing people that you are closest to.

And financial generosity might not always benefit health. Drawing from research on [caregiving](#), financial generosity might provide benefits only when it does not incur overwhelming personal costs. After reading this article, you probably should think twice before donating your entire life savings to charity, because the stress of helping so extensively could undermine any potential benefits.

Although more research is needed to replicate these results, our initial findings provide some of the strongest evidence to date that daily decisions related to engaging in financial generosity can have causal benefits for [physical health](#).

Stepping toward better health (and happiness) may be as simple as spending your next \$20 generously.

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