



Giving to Others is Good for Your Health

By Daniel Casciato

For the past five years, Don and Marianne Plagman did not exchange Christmas gifts with each other. Instead, this McCandless Township couple bought gifts for families in need.

"We feel extremely blessed for what we have and we just want to share it with those who are less fortunate," said Don Plagman. "I was raised without a whole lot so I know what it's like." Plagman said that he and his wife receive the most joy from delivering the presents to the family's homes. "It's just a nice feeling to be able to give back a little to others," he said.

Whether you're giving gifts, volunteering your time, or donating money, some researchers believe that being altruistic could lead to greater well-being, health and longevity. According to the results of a study conducted by the University of Michigan, giving can actually help you live longer. The research was based on 423 senior couples who were studied for five years.

The study found that these seniors who lent a helping hand to friends, neighbors or relatives, reduced their risk of dying by nearly 60 percent compared to those who never offer any help to anyone else.

Dr. Robert H. Trivus said that one explanation for this phenomenon is that helping others produces positive emotions. "Anytime you do something that makes yourself feel good, it causes your brain to release feel-good chemicals or what is biologically known as 'endorphins'," said Trivus, a board-certified psychiatrist, faculty member at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry, and member of the Communications Committee of the Allegheny County Medical Society.

Endorphins are believed to produce four key effects on the body: enhancing the immune system, relieving pain, postponing aging and reducing stress. Reducing stress is another reason why people feel good after giving, according to Dr. Bruce Rabin, professor of pathology, psychiatry and psychology at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine and medical director of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center Healthy Lifestyle Program.

"Giving makes people feel happy, and happiness tends to keep the stress hormones lower," he said. "Individuals of all ages should engage in some type of giving. I especially believe that it's important for parents to become good role models for their children so that it will rub off on future generations."

Plagman agreed. "I just hope people realize how fortunate they are and reach out to others and share it rather than keep it all to themselves."

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