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Health

Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time



Five Ways Volunteering Can Transform Your Life and Benefit Your Mental Health

Do you ever feel that something's missing in your life like there is a gap that you can fill? Perhaps you've been feeling a bit lonely and craving connection. Maybe you are seeking a more defined sense of purpose. There is something that you may have yet to try, but it could lead to some of the answers you've been seeking if you consider volunteering your time.

Volunteering is more than just a way to get involved in your community. It can be a completely transformative experience. It allows you to step out of your comfort zone, meet new people, and discover new passions. And the best part? It's a journey that can lead to a healthier, happier you, enriching your well-being.

When you volunteer, you can uniquely change your life by expanding your worldview, boosting your mood, and reducing stress. Focusing on others can help you find purpose and build self-esteem while allowing you to combat feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and sadness. Connecting with people enables you to find more fulfillment and create lasting social connections while making a difference and participating in your community.

In Canada, volunteering is part of the fabric of our culture. People of all ages are encouraged to do it, and in some provinces, high school students must complete mandatory volunteer hours as part of their education program as a graduation requirement.

- In 2018, 79% of Canadians over age 15 volunteered their time to the tune of about 2.5 billion hours. That effort is valued at approximately \$55 billion.
- The COVID-19 pandemic affected the number of people volunteering now, with 55% of volunteer programs reporting decreased participation but increased demand for the services volunteers deliver.
- Younger volunteers were more likely to teach, coach and tutor, while older volunteers frequently helped with driving to appointments, personal or home care, or paperwork.
- Volunteering can also improve someone's chances of securing paid employment or being considered for entry into specialized post-secondary education programs.¹

We're sharing five ways volunteering can make a big difference in your life.

1. Shifting focus away from yourself and growing beyond self-centered thinking

With our busy lives, we can get caught up in our own problems and sometimes feel like we are spinning our wheels. Volunteering offers a chance to step outside these concerns and gain a fresh perspective by helping us focus on others instead.

It can improve your happiness by brightening someone else's day and helping you feel more connected. Volunteering also reduces stress and provides relief from the overwhelming feelings of anxiety and depression that can weigh on you when you are facing mental health challenges.

You can learn about other people through acts of kindness and service, such as delivering meals to those who cannot leave their homes or are unhoused. Contributing to or even organizing fundraisers to raise money for good causes is another way to help. You can get satisfaction from decluttering at home to collect household items and clothing you no longer use, donating them, or even helping organizations who receive them with sorting and distributing. These activities not only help others but also enrich your own life in meaningful ways.

2. Delivering a boost to your self-esteem

When you help others, you start to feel better about yourself. Volunteering gives you the chance to use your skills in new ways that benefit the community. It boosts your confidence, helps you develop a sense of pride, and lets you recognize your achievements by creating a greater sense of accomplishment.

You could teach someone how to make something, help to build or repair a home, clean up parks, walking trails, and outside spaces, care for animals, or tend to a project like a community garden. You might even learn new skills like volunteer firefighting or coaching sports teams. Seeing the positive impact of your contributions reinforces your sense of competence and value.

3. Finding purpose

Having a sense of purpose in life is an essential part of maintaining our mental health. Volunteering can help you find that purpose, especially if you feel unclear about it. Doing something you love for a good cause brings joy and satisfaction, boosting your mood and helping you define who you are. Simple acts of service can give your life more meaning, help you find happiness and provide direction. When you volunteer, you not only help others but enrich your own life in meaningful ways.

4. Building social connections

Volunteering is a great way to meet new people and make friends. You join like-minded individuals from different backgrounds who share your interests. Working together on volunteer projects builds teamwork skills and a sense of belonging. It also gives you a chance to apply your current skills in new settings, practicing patience and empathy. Many volunteers form lasting friendships and feel more supported by their connections.

Volunteering can also reduce loneliness and isolation. Studies have shown that “volunteers not only live longer, but 82 percent of older adults report that volunteering helps them feel less lonely.”²

5. Living with gratitude

Living with gratitude can change how we see the world and our lives. When we help others, we appreciate what we have and feel more content. It's a way to give back to the community, especially after going through something significant ourselves. Volunteering at health care facilities, for example, can be a way to help us show gratitude for the care we or our loved ones received. It also lets us connect with others experiencing similar emotional challenges by bringing empathy and compassion. We can work through grief we may feel about our own life experiences. When you “have found your way through the challenges of your own grief...[you] may be ready to share your coping skills with others who are in the same boat.”³ By supporting someone's recovery, we can find healing for ourselves while making an impact on others' lives.



Not sure where to start?

Find a cause that excites you and learn how to get involved. Many volunteer programs have streamlined online application processes to make it easy for you.

You may be required to provide information about yourself and explain your interest in volunteering. Depending on the program, you might also need to undergo vulnerable sector checks, provide personal character references, and participate in an interview.

Formal volunteer programs offer a variety of opportunities and provide orientation for new volunteers so they can better understand their roles and commitments. Some even allow you to sign-up for specific opportunities online that fit your schedule.

Explore local hospitals, community events, and websites such as Volunteer Canada and Charity Village to find online opportunities that match your availability.

Keep in mind that many organizations depend on volunteers to help them succeed. Once you commit your time, stick to it. It's important to follow through, as finding replacements at the last minute can be challenging for them.

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