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CHAPTER 2

THE JOY OF GIVING

By Sara Konrath

According to the Corporation for National and Community Service, 62.6 million Americans devoted nearly 7.7 billion hours to unpaid volunteer work in 2014, which was valued at an estimated US\$173 billion. Moreover, *Giving USA* has found that over \$358.38 billion was donated to charitable organizations in 2014. Eighty percent of this came from individuals and bequests. Fundraising professionals likely helped to bring a significant portion of individual donations into nonprofit organizations. Development staff are integral to the success of nonprofit organizations.

However, development staff have a high turnover. A recent national study of development directors found that 50 percent of them planned on leaving their current job in the next 2 years and 40 percent of them planned on leaving the field of fundraising altogether. While there are many organizational characteristics that likely feed into fundraisers' levels of job satisfaction, one factor that should not be ignored is fundraisers' *perceptions of themselves*. Therefore, this chapter covers:

- Fundraisers' role in facilitating the joy of giving.
- The psychological benefits of giving.
- The social benefits of giving.
- The physical health benefits.
- Ways to maximize the benefits of giving.

FUNDRAISERS ARE GIVERS, NOT TAKERS

Although fundraisers participate in a number of complex day-to-day activities, most of these are focused in some way on raising money for a nonprofit organization. In other words, their job is to ask people for money. Fundraisers are often seen as salespeople, but the salesperson's role is not fully accurate because

salespeople are perceived as being money-oriented and driven by profits. The fundraiser-as-salesperson analogy may make fundraisers see themselves as *takers* – taking hard-earned money and valuable time from those who often do not have much of either. Indeed, a 2014 Gallup Poll found that salespeople are among the least trusted professions in the United States, comparable to politicians.

In more ways, however, fundraisers are actually *givers*. Without fundraisers, nonprofits could not follow their important missions. Donors and volunteers could not be as effective in actualizing their personal values. Fundraisers are the high priests of giving. Most donors cannot directly help people in the most effective way possible. For example, someone who feels genuinely concerned about the plight of homeless people can certainly give money directly to homeless people they encounter, but this is likely to address the problem in a limited and temporary way. Giving to a long-term shelter that also has education and job-training programs may be a better investment in terms of what the donor wants to accomplish. Fundraisers help to match people's values with opportunities to give, and, in doing so, they are helping to feed the hungry, take care of the sick, share musical and cultural experiences, and educate generations of students.

Besides the obvious social good this accomplishes, there has been a lot of research recently on the potential benefits that happen to givers themselves. As Hank Rosso, founder of The Fund Raising School at The Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy wrote "*Fundraising is the gentle art of teaching the joy of giving.*" This chapter summarizes the research on the health and well-being benefits of giving money (charitable donations) and time (volunteering). When fundraisers help givers to give, they may not realize that they are bringing these givers more happiness and better health. By being mindful of these health and well-being benefits of giving, I hope that fundraisers can see themselves as serving an important giving role, so that they can also personally experience the joy of giving.

PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS OF GIVING

Many of us believe that if we only had more time and money, we would be happier. In fact, there is much research finding that *giving away* our time and money makes us happier, even though after giving we have less for ourselves.

There have been many studies examining volunteering and well-being, with the vast majority of them finding that people who regularly volunteer have higher happiness, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being than those who do not volunteer. Of course, volunteers are different than non-volunteers in a

number of ways that could explain why they are happier. For example, they tend to have higher incomes and have more social and psychological resources than non-volunteers. However, there has been a lot of research finding that these differences do not fully explain the happiness effects of giving time. Even when scholars statistically control for these variables, the results remain similar.

In addition, a few studies have used a method that is also used to test to see if a new drug works: a randomized control trial. Researchers start with a group of people who are pretty similar at the beginning, and then ask half of these people to volunteer for a period of time and the other half to be on a waiting list. These studies have found that volunteering actually *causes* people to have higher self-esteem and feel less depressed. Other studies find that helping others does not need to be done in the context of a nonprofit organization to increase people's well-being. Being kind to others feels pretty good.

Does giving away money also make people happier? Before answering this question, it is important to note that there is often an overlap between the people who volunteer and those who donate their money. Givers tend to give generously in a variety of ways, so fundraisers should be mindful that sometimes their next big donors are literally right under their noses volunteering for their events and programs. In fact, the "time-ask effect" finds that if people are first asked to give their time to an organization, and then only later asked to make a financial donation, they will give more of both. When people are first asked to make a financial donation, they give less time and money. This is because thinking about money automatically activates concepts of individualism and self-focus.

There are far fewer studies on the psychological effects of giving money compared to giving time, but the results in these studies are pretty consistent. Most of these studies find that giving money to others, including charities, is associated with more happiness than spending it on oneself. For example, one study asked participants to spend a small amount of money (either \$5 or \$20) on themselves versus another person, and then the researchers measured participants' mood at the end of the day. People who spent their money on someone else were happier than those who spent it on themselves, regardless of the amount of money spent. Other research has found that simply *recalling* spending on others has similar mood boosting effects. These positive emotions, in turn, inspire even more giving behavior. Therefore, giving feels good, even if we are just recalling a time when we gave, and these good feelings could pay off in terms of increased donations.

Donating money in the specific context of the workplace not only makes people happier but it has been shown to increase job satisfaction and make people work better on teams. This implies that corporate giving programs should be channeled directly through employees in addition to being handled by corporate development directors. Giving employees a chance to choose where corporate

charitable dollars should be spent may have implications for employee retention and productivity.

Fundraisers need not worry that they might erase these benefits of giving by sharing the news with potential donors. Even when people are aware of the potential happiness effects of giving, this does not diminish the psychological rewards. Indeed, one study found that donors gave *more* when they learned of the potential happiness-building effects of giving.

Nor should fundraisers worry that these psychological rewards will necessarily be fleeting. Several studies demonstrate that giving is associated with long-lasting good feelings. For example, people who are asked to regularly and frequently do *small kind acts for others* feel happier up to 2 months later. There are similar findings when it comes to *giving money to others*. For example, one study found that people who chose to spend more of their employment bonus on others felt happier up to 2 months later, while another study found that participants who donated more money to charity at one time point were happier up to 9 years later.

Even more incredible is that these happiness boosts seem to be noticeable by outside observers. It is not just that people think they are happier after they give, but it seems as though they are genuinely experiencing more positive emotion.

These effects are pretty strong and have been found in many studies. However, when people are asked to guess which one will make them happier, spending money on themselves versus spending it on others, they have no clue about the powerful effects of giving on their own happiness. Instead, they think they will be happier when spending on themselves. This, in part, could help to explain why people so desperately chase after the latest gadgets and fashion, but it also reveals an opportunity for fundraisers to fill in a knowledge gap.

Not only can giving money make people happier but it also makes them feel richer. A recent study gave some participants the opportunity to make a donation to a needy child, while other participants were not given this opportunity. Donating money made people feel as though they were doing better financially than average. This is despite the fact that objectively they had less money because they just gave some away.

Giving time to others can lead to similar feelings of abundance. A recent paper gave some participants the opportunity to give their time to help others (e.g., write a letter to a sick child) while other participants either spent time on their own or were allowed to leave the experiment early, thus buying them time. Across four studies, the authors found that giving time to others led to more feelings of “time affluence,” the subjective feeling of having a lot of free time available. Amazingly, people feel like their schedules are less rushed after giving away time

to others, despite the fact that objectively they have less time because they just gave some away.

The psychological benefits of giving and volunteering go beyond the increased experience of positive emotions among psychologically healthy populations. Giving is also associated with fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety, which, if untreated, could become full-blown psychological disorders. Among those who have ongoing psychological problems, such as post-traumatic stress disorder or social anxiety, giving can help to manage their symptoms.

SOCIAL BENEFITS OF GIVING

The joy of giving and volunteering can also spread to others.

First, there is research finding that giving is literally contagious. People's giving behavior spreads into their closest friendships and family members, and into their broader social networks. This is because when people are the recipients of generosity or see someone else give, this inspires us to give as well. For example, parents can influence their children by not only giving but by directly talking about their giving behaviors with their children. Parents also have an influential role in the development of giving-related traits in their children. Research has found that there are certain parenting styles that predict more empathic and giving children. Highly involved fathers and parents whose discipline focuses on others' feelings have more empathic children.

On the flip side, parents also have an influence on their children's narcissistic self-focus. Narcissism is a personality trait that involves an inflated sense of self-esteem and entitlement. Just as parents can encourage their children to be more aware of others' needs, they can help to create self-centered and miserly children. All they need to do is indulge their children's every whim, reminding their children of how superior and special they are.

Not only is giving socially learned and spread, but it also enriches people's social relationships, both in quantity and quality. Kind people are likeable and others want to be around them. For example, the number one trait that both men and women are looking for in a romantic partner is kindness. One randomized control trial asked one group of preadolescents to do three small kind acts for others each week for four weeks and another group to visit three new places each week. The researchers found that the teens in the kindness group became more popular with their peers by the end of the study.

Volunteering and donating money to important causes can help people to meet others who share similar passions and more deeply enmeshes people within their local communities. For example, one study found that older adults who were

assigned to volunteer had more social connections over a period of 4 to 8 months, while those in the wait-list control group had a decline in their number of social connections. Volunteers also experienced a 16.7 percent increase that others would support them if they needed it, while people in the control group experienced a 25.3 percent decline in perceived social support.

Among older adults, volunteering helps people who are dealing with shifting roles, for example, as older adults retire and their children become more independent of them. It can help to give people a sense that they are important and needed, which can help to buffer them from the potential stresses of aging, including losing important social relationships and experiencing declining health.

PHYSICAL BENEFITS OF GIVING

There has been a lot of research examining the physical health implications of volunteering and giving. For example, interesting new work has been examining what happens in the brain while people make charitable donations. This research finds that when donating money, the pleasure/reward centers of the brain light up as much as when receiving money. These physiological effects mirror the psychological effects discussed earlier in this chapter.

However, there is only limited research examining the immediate physiological consequences of giving. Our research has found that people who are highly empathic have lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol after stressful events. Other research confirms that shifting one's focus away from the self and toward others can buffer oneself from stressors, and that giving money to others is directly associated with lower cortisol. In addition, volunteering has been shown to be associated with better cardiovascular health in a number of studies.

Taken together, increased positive emotions and decreased stress hormones are likely to have implications for physical health. Indeed, volunteers self-report being healthier than non-volunteers. Our research has found that volunteering is associated with good health, especially for religious people. Perhaps, by volunteering, religious people are affirming their most cherished beliefs to help and serve others.

Giving can also make people physically stronger, at least temporarily. In one study researchers asked people who were waiting for a subway to hold a 5 pound weight with their arms stretched horizontally for as long as they could. They were then given a \$1 payment and half of them were asked to donate it to UNICEF (they all did), while the other half just kept it. People who donated the money were able to hold the 5 pound weight for a longer period of time than those who did not donate the money. Two other studies confirmed that giving

literally made people physically stronger. That feeling of “I can make a difference” is literally energizing.

The Joy of Giving Across the Lifespan

Given all of the benefits of giving described so far, it should perhaps no longer be surprising that volunteering is associated with longevity. An analysis of over a dozen studies across a 25 period found that volunteering is associated with a 47 percent reduced risk of dying overall and a 24 percent reduction in the risk of dying when statistically adjusting for demographic variables. There are no known studies on whether giving money is associated with a reduced mortality risk or whether volunteering is associated with certain causes of mortality more than others (e.g., cancer, heart disease, injuries).

Most of the research so far on the effects of giving time and money have been conducted on older adults, because they tend to have more time to volunteer for nonprofits and to be in studies. Studies have generally found that the health and well-being benefits of giving tend to be stronger as people age. This might be because of different types of volunteer jobs across different age groups or different motives for volunteering as people age. Giving time and money is also associated with more psychological well-being and better health in middle-age adults, adolescents, and even children.

The Joy of Giving Around the World

Similarly, most of the research on the effects of giving time and money have been conducted on people from North America and Western Europe. However, there is an emerging cross-cultural literature that suggests people from many cultures around the world experience the joy of giving and volunteering.

There are a number of large cross-national studies that take advantage of the Gallup World Poll, which conducts regular large surveys that represent approximately 95 percent of the world’s population. These studies have examined between 136 to 142 countries worldwide and confirmed that, in most cultures, volunteering is associated with higher well-being (86 percent of cultures studied) and better health (88 percent of cultures studied), and donating to charity is associated with higher well-being (90 percent of cultures). These results are similar even in poor countries where resources are scarcer, and are not explained by the fact that volunteers and donors may differ in demographic factors such as gender, age, religiosity, and income.

Taken together, all of this research shows that even though of course giving away money and time means that there is less left for the self, it does not feel that way. The *paradox of generosity* is that people feel happier, richer, and healthier

after giving their money and time to others. Having money in itself does not make people happier, but the way people spend it can affect their happiness.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MOTIVES

Should we give in order to experience these benefits? No, there is evidence that “nobody can reap the personal rewards that generous practices tend to produce by going through the motions of generosity simply in order to reap those desired rewards” (Smith and Davidson, 2014, p. 7).

There are many different reasons to volunteer. Some of these reasons are more focused on others’ needs, such as wanting to help others or joining in with loved ones on causes that are important to them. Others are more focused on how one might personally benefit from helping, such as learning new things, feeling better about oneself, escaping one’s troubles, and helping to promote one’s career.

One study examined whether the motives of 4085 Australian volunteers were associated with a number of well-being indicators. The researchers found that people who volunteered for other-oriented reasons had higher self-esteem, psychological well-being, and self-efficacy, which is a sense of oneself as competent. These other-oriented volunteers also felt more socially connected. People with the more self-oriented motives of escaping their troubles or promoting their career scored lower on these well-being indicators. One potential personal benefit of volunteering is learning new things, and in this study, having this motive was associated with better well-being.

One of our studies used the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study to examine whether motives for volunteering among a sample of 3376 older adults predicted their risk of dying four years later. We found that older adults who volunteered for reasons related to others’ needs had a lower chance of dying four years later. Those who said that they volunteered because they could personally benefit had a slightly *higher* chance of dying four years later. In our study we statistically controlled for a number of different potential explanations for these results, such as their previous mental and physical health and their socioeconomic status. Therefore we know that these results are not because other-oriented volunteers were healthier or richer than more self-oriented volunteers.

When it comes to the reasons that people choose to donate money, there is much less research. So far, scholars have identified several reasons for making donations, without examining the implications for health and well-being. Similar to volunteering, many people donate money because they are aware of the need and they care about the recipients. They also donate because they trust that organizations will use their money appropriately and productively. There are also

a number of less prosocial motives for giving: to avoid being embarrassed when publicly asked to donate or to fit in with others, to gain power or recognition for their gifts, to enjoy tax incentives for giving, to avoid feeling guilty, or to feel good about themselves. One additional major reason that people give is simply because they are asked. Studies find that the vast majority of charitable donations (between 85 and 86 percent) come after being directly asked to give.

Based on the findings that other-oriented motives for volunteering are better for health and well-being, it is likely that other-oriented motives for charitable donations are associated with similar benefits. However, future research will provide more insight on this question.

Maximizing the Joy of Giving

Besides having other-focused motives, there are a number of practices that seem to maximize the joy of giving.

First, the social aspects of giving seem to contribute to their happiness. For example, when scholars examined a set of 37 studies on the relationship between volunteering and well-being, they found that volunteering was associated with double the amount of happiness when the volunteering activities involved directly interacting with others, versus a more indirect type of helping. There are no known studies that examine similar questions with respect to charitable donations, but I would expect that giving in person (e.g., directly to a fundraiser or at a charity event) would make people happier than giving in other ways (e.g., mail, online, automatic payroll deductions).

Next, there are specific ways to give that can maximize the joy of giving. Framing the giving instruction as more concrete (e.g., make someone smile) instead of more abstract (e.g., make someone happy) increases the happiness of giving to others. Therefore, fundraisers should consider designing their donation appeals to elicit simple concrete behaviors, rather than higher-level conceptual ones.

Giving in a variety of different ways and to different types of people also makes people happier than giving the same way and to the same people over and over again. This suggests that, just like a healthy diet of food, a healthy giving diet should involve variety to avoid the acts becoming routine. Since some of the joy of giving comes from its novelty, fundraisers should think about how to encourage a variety of giving experiences among their constituents.

At times, it is not even necessary to actually give in order to experience the joy of giving! As in the case of motives, the psychological aspects of giving and donating are at least as important as the behaviors themselves. For example, simply counting the number of kind acts that one performs can make

people happier. People who became more aware of their kind acts by counting them ended up feeling happier and more grateful compared to control participants. Altruistic attitudes also matter, such as saying that you enjoy helping others or that you try to help even if others can't return the favor. In fact, altruistic attitudes at one time point had a larger independent effect on positive emotions than prosocial behaviors such as volunteering for a nonprofit organization or helping friends. It is the thought that counts – being ready to serve and help matters, even if actual opportunities for helping do not present themselves.

Why Is Giving Good for People?

Why is giving good for people's health? The ultimate why, in terms of why *as a species* we should find giving so rewarding, is that we are hard-wired for face-to-face contact that includes lots of mutual touch, eye contact, and smiles. Such interactions activate a complex bonding and stress regulation system that originates in parental caregiving, but generalizes beyond infants and to any distressed person. Ultimately, I believe that giving is good for us because when giving to others we are acting in accordance with our deepest natures.

However, we can also analyze specific processes that happen *in the moment* when someone is giving, versus *over time*, after repeated practices of giving.

The immediate act of giving causes people to shift their focus of attention away from themselves and toward others. Focusing on the self can be quite toxic for mental health, while shifting one's focus of attention toward others can reduce anxiety and stress. Indeed, one study found that volunteering helped people to take their minds off their work during leisure time and create new psychosocial resources to cope with stress. Other leisure activities did not seem to have such benefits.

When giving, people also tend to make comparative judgments about the situations of the recipients versus their own situations. Giving helps people to feel more gratitude for their own situations; "*It could be worse.*" In one study that provides some initial support for this idea, people felt higher life satisfaction after giving to a charity that helped poor people than after giving to a charity that did not involve a downward comparison. However, this might be because giving to people directly is more pleasurable than more indirect giving.

As reviewed in this chapter, giving leads to more positive emotion in the moment, which helps to repair and restore one's mind and body from stressors. Positive emotion in itself predicts healthier and longer lives, so the "joy of giving" in itself may be a critical explanation for the physical health benefits of giving.

It is also worth underscoring the increases in physical activity that come with giving. For example, one study found that volunteers had a 31 percent

increase in the distance walked each week, while control group participants declined by 9 percent. Volunteering means getting off the couch and out of the house, and physical activity in itself is associated with better health and well-being and greater longevity.

Next, what happens *after* repeated giving interactions? Over time, giving makes people see that they have an important role to play in relieving others' suffering and making others happy. In other words, giving increases givers' sense of meaning and purpose in life. Studies have found that people with a defined sense of purpose in life live longer and healthier lives than those with a less defined sense of purpose.

Over repeated giving interactions, people start to meet like-minded others, feel more connected and less lonely, and increase their sense that others are there for them. In themselves, social connections predict healthier and longer lives. Repeated giving interactions are like deposits into a resilience bank account with compound interest. All of the potential explanations of why giving is associated with better health have something in common: they help people to deal with unanticipated negative life events and stressors. For example, studies have found that volunteering helps people to deal with changing roles and provides a sense of stability in unstable situations. Giving to others functions as a social insurance policy – that if something bad happens, everything will be okay. Again, this is as long as the giving comes from a true spirit of generosity.

Is There Such a Thing as Giving Too Much?

Of course, it is possible for people to give beyond their means in terms of time and money, but I suspect that joyful givers know their limits.

When it comes to volunteering, studies have found that volunteering between 1 and 15 hours per week is associated with optimal health and well-being. Volunteering less than 1 hour per week is not beneficial, perhaps because this represents more intermittent volunteering, rather than regular weekly practices of giving.

As for charitable donations, one recent study found that Americans who donated 10 percent of their money were happier than those who donated less than 10 percent of their money. The authors used 10 percent as a cutoff point since some religions encourage this amount of giving; however, they did not explore whether there a point at which giving was no longer associated with increased happiness. This could be because it was highly unusual for people to give this much away – only 2.7 percent of their participants did so. Another study found that the more money people gave, the higher their psychological well-being, and the authors did not find any cutoff point after which there were fewer benefits of giving. In fact, spending money on others is associated with increased well-being

even in relatively poor countries. However, it seems reasonable to assume that at a certain point, donating to charity might be bad for well-being, especially if people give to the point that they cannot take care of their own needs. Such over-giving is rare, and the more common problem is *under-giving*.

In general, it seems best for people to give from their surplus resources. For example, it might be better for lower income people to give their time than their money, since researchers have found that volunteering predicts higher happiness in low income people compared to high income people. This might have to do with available resources of lower income people, who may have more surplus time than money.

Finally, when it comes to other acts of kindness, the more people give and the more they make giving part of the practice of their everyday life, the more joy they experience from giving. For example, performing nine acts of kindness per week leads to more happiness than performing three acts per week.

A Daily Dose of “Vitamin G”

Doctors regularly recommend that their patients make healthy eating choices, get lots of physical activity, and refrain from smoking. Yet at this point in time, it is hard to imagine that doctors would recommend a daily dose of Vitamin G (giving) to their patients. However, as more research on the links between altruism and health emerges, perhaps one day giving will be included in the list of healthy lifestyle behaviors. Until then, development professionals play an important role in disseminating this information. By helping others to give by keeping up with the latest research on the health effects of givers, fundraisers are giving as much (or even more) than the donors that they cultivate.

CONCLUSION: A RECIPE FOR GIVING

It seems appropriate for a chapter title that refers to a famous cookbook to end with a recipe for giving. These measurements and ingredients are taken from previous research summarized in this chapter, but expert givers (like expert cooks) will make changes to suit their lifestyle and preferences. These are just guidelines, and there is still a lot left to know about how to optimize giving for our health and well-being.

When using this recipe givers must understand that there are many ways to be generous. Overall, I recommend creating *practices of generosity* since research

finds that such regular practices are what seem to drive the psychological benefits of giving. Whether you are a marathon runner, a concert pianist, or learning a new language, the best way to become an expert at a new skill is to break it down into smaller repeated pieces that can be practiced regularly, typically at least once per day. The recipe for “Giving Goulash” is as follows:

- Slice and dice your schedule and budget so that you can give your time and money to nonprofit organizations. This will create regular times to practice and prioritize generosity.
- Add specific concrete giving goals (e.g., make someone smile, feed a child).
- Reduce your focus on the self and increase your focus on others when giving. Let your self-focus simply evaporate as others’ needs become central.
- Measure your kind acts: pay attention to the ways that you give to others, whether it’s opening a door for a stranger, letting a neighbor borrow a tool, listening to others, or volunteering and donating to charities.
- Add a pinch of gratitude for the resources that allow you to give.
- Mix with social interactions: give together with other people to maximize the benefits.
- Season with a willingness to be the recipient of others’ giving. Allowing others to give to you not only benefits them in all the ways described in this chapter but helps you to avoid compassion fatigue.
- Variety is the spice of giving. Give in many different ways to maximize flavor.
- Simmer the different ingredients of giving in oxytocin, the bonding and stress regulation hormone.
- Be ready to serve whenever is needed, with a caring attitude toward others.
- Savor the pleasure of making a difference in others’ lives.
- Repeat often, whenever you see someone hungry for kindness.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Compare and contrast the effects of giving money versus giving time on givers' health and well-being. Is there more research on one area or the other? Is giving money or time better for health and well-being?
2. Do you think that there are some people or circumstances for which giving might be harmful, rather than helpful, for health or well-being?
3. If someone feels good after donating his/her money or time to a charitable organization, does this mean that his/her actions were not altruistic?
4. How can fundraisers apply these findings to their own professional practice?
 - a. How might this information be used to help them feel more satisfaction with their jobs?
 - b. How might this information be used to help them achieve their fundraising goals?

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