

Doing Good Deeds Reduces Pain



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"Helper's high" may not be a phrase you use every day, but you've probably felt it. It is how we feel when we voluntarily help another, whether we are shoveling snow off a neighbor's sidewalk, tutoring a struggling student, or serving a hot, healthy meal at a family shelter. Research has shown that the act of giving can trigger the release of neurochemicals that make us feel good.

And now we know that volunteering, giving, and other altruistic behaviors can not only help us cope with pain, but can actually relieve it.

A newly released study finds that the experience of giving deactivates parts of the brain that reacts to pain. Researchers also found that "Acting altruistically relieved not only acutely induced physical pain among healthy adults but also chronic pain among cancer patients."

For example, as part of the research, cancer patients with chronic pain were asked to cook and clean for themselves and for others at their treatment center. Pain levels dropped among those patients who helped others.

How wonderful that we have scientific research to validate what many of us have known all along: volunteering helps others and ourselves. And, how interesting it will be, as research like this seeps into medical practice and cultural approaches to good health and well-being. Volunteering is becoming something we do because volunteering is part of good self-care, like a balanced diet and exercise.

This time of year, we honor the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., through service and other acts of altruism. He famously asked, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, what are you doing for others?" Perhaps someday soon health care professionals who treat pain and illness will ask us the same thing.