

MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING

Altruism and wellbeing

As our collective worship theme for this term is kindness, I thought I would share some ideas which links altruism with our own wellbeing.

Altruism can be good for your wellbeing. It is defined as caring about other people and acting in someone else's interest. For example, we may be acting altruistically and helping others by offering our seat to a pregnant woman or elderly person on a bus or volunteering in our community.

Many psychologists believe that we may be hard-wired for empathy, since cooperative behaviour allowed our ancestors to survive under harsh conditions. Many of us agree that when we make the effort to give without expectations of reciprocity, we often do receive something in return, we may feel fulfilled and energised by these acts of giving.

There are many different ways that you can help others as part of your everyday life. Carrying out good deeds doesn't need to take a lot of time or even cost money. Small changes can make a big difference.

What are the health benefits of helping others?

Many of us feel too stressed and busy to think about helping others, or we say we will do good deeds and volunteer when we have more time. However evidence shows that helping others is actually beneficial for your own mental health as can improve your wellbeing. Some of the benefits associated with helping others are:

It promotes positive physiological changes in the brain associated with happiness

Giving to and helping other people releases endorphins which then activate parts of our brain that are associated with trust, pleasure and social connection. Being altruistic and spending money on others leads to greater levels of happiness compared to when you spend money on yourself. This happiness then increases the chance that we will be altruistic and do good deeds in the future, ultimately creating a positive feedback loop of generosity and happiness.

It brings a sense of belonging and reduces isolation

Being a part of a social network leads to feelings of belonging and being altruistic can reduce stress levels. By helping others and focusing on others oftentimes we receive good feelings back.

It helps to keep things in perspective

Helping people in need, especially those who are less fortunate than yourself, or volunteering can provide a sense of perspective and can make one realise how lucky they are, enabling one to stop focusing on what they feel may be missing in their life - this helps one achieve a more positive outlook on the things that may be causing you stress.

It reduces stress and improves our health

Evidence suggests that helping others can boost our health. Emotions which are related to helping people such as compassion may help stabilise the immune system against immunosuppressing effects of stress. Altruistic acts may also decrease pain by stimulating the brain to release endorphins, which are powerful natural painkillers.

It helps reduce negative feelings

People who give to others have better life adjustment overall and tend to see life as more meaningful. Altruism is associated with better marital relationships, a decreased sense of hopelessness, less depression, increased physical health, and enhanced self-esteem. Acts of altruism may also neutralise negative emotions that affect immune, endocrine and cardiovascular function.

It can help us live longer

Helping people may increase how long we live. Studies on older people show that those who give support to others live longer than those who don't.

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