

The Immunity of Samaritans

Beyond Self

*In the body/mind economy,
the benefits of helping other people flow back to the helper.
New research shows that doing good may be good for your heart,
your immune system—and your overall vitality.
By Eileen Rockefeller Growald and Allan Luks*

Self-Made Heroes

This anniversary issue of *American Health* celebrates the new-found link between helping others and physical health. You'll read about people who've reached out in every way—starting with Ken Kesey, who made the ultimate gift of his son's organs. Others work on problems from schizophrenia to AIDS. Each tells the joys of fitness, improve the environment, or help the handicapped. They're proving even ordinary people can do extraordinary things.

Throughout this year, we'll bring you reports on the new definition of health: a new that involves other people, not just the individual. Birthdays, for starters, are the stories of 15 New Americans.

—The Editors

Exercise regularly, eat a well-balanced diet and do something nice for someone. That's the advice you're apt to get from your doctor in the near future. There's more evidence than ever that helping others has definite health benefits for those who lend a helping hand. In an explosion of new research, the benefits of altruism—long praised by moralists—are being proven by psychologists, epidemiologists and neuroscientists.

The idea of helping yourself by helping others isn't new. Members of Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, learned long ago that helping someone else beat the bottle can make it easier to beat your own addiction. Recovering alcoholics are expected to call or visit their struggling peers, to be there when they're needed—even if it means being phoned in the sleepy hours of the night. They do it because

they realize that taking the helpful role creates a feeling of inner strength that can overcome their own problem.

But helping other people brings real physical benefits as well as psychological ones, according to epidemiologist James House and his colleagues at the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center. They studied 2,700 people in Tecumseh, MI, for more than a decade, to see how their social relationships affected their health.

The researchers found that doing regular volunteer work, more than any other activity, dramatically increased life expectancy (and probably vitality). Men who did no volunteer work were two and a half times as likely to die during the study as men who volunteered at least once a week. (The health benefits of volunteerism were less clear for women—perhaps because most women already spend a lot

of time looking after other people, whether they join a volunteer group or not.)

One key benefit of volunteering is that it's a way of connecting with people. Other data from Tecumseh show that those of us with many social contacts tend to live longer than more isolated individuals. In fact, even pleasant, relaxing activities may be *bad* for your health if they make you more isolated. In the Tecumseh study, people who spent a lot of time reading, listening to the radio or watching television had a higher-than-average mortality rate.

Several studies have shown that people need other people for their health's sake. In one of the largest surveys, epidemiologists Lisa Berkman of Yale and H. Leonard Syme of the University of California, Berkeley, studied nearly 5,000 residents of Alameda County, CA. Over nine years, they found that those who were unmarried, had few friends or relatives and shunned community organizations were more than twice as likely to die during that time than people who had these social relationships. This was true regardless of race, income, level of activity and other lifestyle factors.

Findings like these have led psychologist Robert Ornstein and physician David Sobel to propose that the need for community is a key part of our evolutionary heritage. In *The Healing Brain* (Simon and Schuster, \$19.95)—an *American Health Book Award* winner—they argue that the brain's primary purpose is not to think, but to guard the body from illness. The brain acts as an internal health maintenance organization, governing everything from the release of stress hormones to the functioning of the im-

mune system. And, according to Drs. Ornstein and Sobel, "It now appears that the brain cannot do its job of protecting the body without contact with other people. It draws vital nourishment from our friends, lovers, relatives, lodge brothers and sisters, even perhaps our co-workers and the members of our weekly bowling team."

It's not surprising, they say, that we should have evolved to be so dependent on others. "Evolution has less regard for the individual than for the survival of the species. Our brain may have evolved to protect our health so that we could contribute to the survival of our kind. Collaborative efforts in the protection and rearing of offspring, in hunting and food gathering, in fighting off the attacks of large predators—even in huddling together against the cold—improved our species' chances for survival." Conclusion: "Evolution has made us dependent on the group because the group is dependent on us."

The Physiology of Altruism

Though researchers now agree that social involvement is good for your health, they're just starting to figure out why. The late Hans Selye, who founded modern stress research, thought that helping others could keep your nervous system from going into overdrive. By doing good for people, Dr. Selye reasoned, you inspire their gratitude and affection, and this warmth will help protect you from the stress of life. Altruism is the currency with which we buy the social support that sustains us. In his classic, *The Stress of Life*, Selye coined the phrase "altruistic egoism"—or, as we might call it, selfish altruism—to describe this idea.

That feeling of warmth from doing good may well come from endorphins—the brain's natural opiates, which have also been linked to the highs we feel from running and meditation. Animals given naloxone, a chemical that blocks the effect of endorphins, dramatically increase their attempts to seek out contact with other animals. Psychologist Jaak Panksepp, of Bowling Green State University, believes that the opiate system will turn out to modulate altruism.

Scientists are also finding that doing good may be good for your immune system as well as your nervous system. These two regulators of health are turning out to be intimately linked. Nerve cells connect the brain to parts of the body, like the bone marrow and spleen, that produce the immune-system cells needed to fight off infection. Researchers like Candace Pert, who has worked at Johns Hopkins University and the National Institute of Mental Health, have shown the blood cells making up the immune system are exquisitely sensitive to "neuropeptides"—chemicals produced by the brain.

Research is showing, too, that our social relationships directly affect our immune systems, and our health. At Ohio State University, psychologist Janice Kiecolt-Glaser and her colleagues compared 38 married women with an equal number of women who were separated or divorced. They found that married women had better immune function than the unmarried—and women who reported they were *happily* married had the healthiest immune systems of all the groups. Separated women also went to the doctor 30% more often than the married ones (see "Why Some Divorcées

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Die Young," *AH*, Dec. '87, p. 78).

Does this mean you have to be married to have a healthy immune system? Not necessarily. Doing good—or even *thinking* about altruistic action—may give the immune system a boost.

In one striking and still controversial study at Harvard, psychologist David McClelland showed students a film of Mother Teresa, the embodiment of altruism, working among Calcutta's sick and poor. Tests revealed an increase in Immunoglobulin A, an antibody that helps defend the body against respiratory infections. Even some students who said they didn't like the saintly nun showed the enhanced immune response. Researchers aren't certain what the finding means, but it hints at a link between altruism and immunity.

Whether or not this connection holds up, it's clear that your risk of heart disease is dramatically affected by your attitudes towards other people. Hostility—the opposite of altruism—definitely multiplies your risk.

This new understanding of the "angry heart" was first developed by Charles Spielberger, a psychologist at the University of South Florida. Researchers had already shown that people with a hard-driving, hurried, competitive style—called Type-A personalities—had a higher-than-average heart disease risk. But when Dr. Spielberger went back and analyzed the data, he found many aspects of the Type-A personality to be harmless. Only a few factors really hurt the heart: the varied forms of anger, irritability and aggressive competitiveness.

Other researchers have now found that only certain Type A's—the hostile ones—are likely to get sick. A study by Duke University psychiatrist Redford Williams found that the more hostile the person, the more blocked

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his coronary arteries were. And the University of Maryland's James Lynch finds that people who do not listen well to others—but just wait for a chance to answer back—tend to have higher blood pressure. Hypertension, he says, "is a communication problem."

Dean Ornish, an internist at the University of California, San Francisco medical school, suggests that hostile heart patients get into a vicious cycle. Their hostility cuts them off from other people, which makes them more self-involved and hostile, which further isolates them from other people. To break the cycle, Dr. Ornish encourages patients to do things for others. For instance, he had two patients who disliked one another do each other's laundry. Such selfless acts, Ornish says, help reduce his patients' cholesterol levels and chest pains.

A More Helpful Society?

The notion that altruism is good for people could have a profound social effect. We could see a sudden rise of volunteerism. Good Samaritans might cease to be a rare breed. Just as people now exercise and watch their diets to protect their health, they may soon scrape peeling paint from their elderly neighbor's house, collect money for the March of Dimes, campaign for a nuclear freeze, teach illiterates how to read or clean up trash from a public park—all for the same self-protective reason.

Dr. Jonas Salk, developer of the polio vaccine, believes our society is at a crisis stage. But he also believes that in such crises, humans manage to produce the knowledge and wisdom necessary to help them choose "the most evolutionarily advantageous path." Our developing knowledge about the

health benefits of altruism may be a case in point.

In any case, that knowledge comes none too soon, if the recent turbulence in our economy is a barometer of things to come. During the Great Depression of the '30s, it was altruism that came to the rescue of thousands—*before* the federal government started its famous public works projects and soup kitchens. Early in the Depression, when Chicago was unable to pay its teachers, a consortium of community and business leaders met the payroll. Good Samaritans all over the country pulled together through Community Chest organizations, a volunteer force that provided food, clothing and health care to thousands. Should we face another depression, we will need all the altruism we can muster.

Some will resist the notion that altruism is a form of selfishness; science, they may feel, is depriving humanity of something noble. To profit by doing something nice for someone might seem to cheapen the act. But the reality is that we are first and foremost a communal species, designed by nature to be utterly dependent upon our neighbors. If helping a neighbor is in our own best interest, so much the better.

Samuel Butler said it best in *The Way of All Flesh*: Virtue, like gold, is stronger when alloyed with a baser metal. In these tough times, we need to develop plenty of virtuous strength—even if it takes a little enlightened selfishness to drive us. ♥

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