

VOLUNTEERING IS GOOD FOR YOUR HEALTH

TODAY Show Interview with Allan Luks, Executive Director,
Institute for the Advancement of Health

March 1, 1988

Host: There was always an implied selfishness in the golden rule, "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you" - that is, do it only for the benefit you're going to get back from them. Now there's a scientific study that says you may not have to wait on other people. You may be helping yourself immediately. With us this morning is Allan Luks, the executive director of the Institute for the Advancement of Health. You mean doing good immediately benefits us?

Luks: Well we feel good. People get involved in altruism for a variety of reasons. They feel guilt, they feel empathy, they feel peer pressure. But once we get involved in helping other people it's only by feeling good, it's a really physical, tangible feeling that keeps people going. All the studies keep showing that. What we have done for the first time, we being the Institute for the Advancement of Health, and my co-researcher and writer, Eileen Rockefeller Growald, have brought together the research which shows that continued helping, probably at least about once a week, this good feeling, can reverse the effects of stress, bring on significant health benefits and that persons who help compared to those that don't help, live longer.

Host: All right, we've heard that exercise, plenty of sleep, good diet would increase our life expectancy. Now you're saying good deeds will actually make a difference?

Luks: Absolutely. I think it's very much part of this health revolution - the health revolution which has been focusing on me...what can I do for myself? This new research, which comes from the leading medical schools throughout the country, is saying in addition you have to be caring and connect with other people.

Host: But why? What medical reason is there for a physical benefit from actions?

Luks: We know that lonely people, isolated, recently widowed widowers, recently divorced, have more health problems, can die sooner. This is kind of the flip side. By helping other people you gain more control over your circumstances which is what the lonely, the isolated persons don't have. You have more social support, you feel part of a greater group. And the fascinating studies showed what causes this feeling good. It's probably the endorphins, part of our brain chemistry, our feelings, the chemicals that make us feel good - the same chemicals that are released when we jog, when we do physical activity are caused when we help other people. In fact one of the reasons we decided to unveil this new research in American Health Magazine is very much as you say, it's part of the health revolution. And if we can get this powerful force in getting people to realize that caring for others can enhance their own health, there'll be tremendous benefits for society. But it's real. It's not a grandmother's tale. It's supported by scientific research.

Host: On the surface it might seem like the benefit of thinking about others just stops you from concentrating on yourself so much and pressing ahead with the type A personality where you focus narrowly on your job or a goal straight ahead. But watching television or just sitting around the house does not have the same effect. You actually have to contribute to the welfare of someone else is what you're saying?

Luks: That's right. The good feeling we get which reverses stress does not come about by just sitting alone in the house and resting. In effect that isolation and loneliness can contribute to the stress which causes so many problems from stomach disorders to high blood pressure, etc.

Host: What about the opposite? Does being nasty shorten your life?

Luks: Well the studies showed that when comparing those persons who helped at least once a week in a

variety of outdoor activities to those who didn't, those who helped had a life expectancy that's three times greater.

Host: That's an amazing number.

Luks: That's an amazing statistic. And the studies have been done in Alameda County, California, an urban area, in a rural area of Michigan. They keep repeating themselves. This comes at a time in our society when we have so much tension, where people in suits you see fighting over parking spaces. So this research couldn't be more important at this time.

Host: Will this, do you suspect, increase voluntarism?

Luks: It will surely increase voluntarism. I think just as the research on aerobic performance increased exercise on cholesterol change, eating habits...this will increase voluntarism. But only one third of the public for example now exercises but that exercise increases the awareness that we can help our own health. I think this will increase our awareness that to be aware of our fellow man can affect our own health. And that can, in fact, help society.

Host: There's an interesting quote that "virtue is like gold, it's better when mixed with a baser metal", meaning a little selfishness doesn't hurt in this case.

Luks: And it's natural. It'll make us feel good naturally.

Host: Thank you very much Allan Luks for sharing that with us. Do good, feel good.