HELPER'S HIGH

Volunteering makes people feel good, physically and emotionally. And like "runner's calm," it's probably good for your health.

BY ALLAN LUKS

PEOPLE WHO EXERCISE vigorously often describe feeling high during a workout — and a sense of calmness and freedom from stress afterward. New evidence reveals that these same emotional and physical changes can be produced with activity requiring much less exertion — helping others.

An analysis of the experiences of more than 1,700 women who were involved regularly in helping others highlights these surprising effects. In many cases, this "helper's calm" was linked to relief from stress-related disorders such as headaches, voice loss and even pain accompanying lupus and multiple sclerosis.

The study began last February, when *Better Homes and Gardens* did a brief report on helping others and asked readers to write the Institute for the Advancement of Health about their own experiences — how often they helped and their feelings, if any, when helping. They were also asked about their current health. We received 246 lengthy responses from throughout the country. We later got 1,500 questionnaire responses from members of a large women's volunteer group — women who, importantly, had not seen the magazine article.

The results of the two studies were so surprising that we asked researchers to help us analyze the data as a first step toward systematic experiments. For example, 68 percent of the *Better Homes and Gardens* readers and 88 percent of the club members reported feeling an identifiable physical sensation — best described as stimulation — during the actual helping. Highs, warmth and increased energy were mentioned in half the letters and a quarter of the surveys. One woman called it "a gentle tightness in my chest and neck, like an increased blood flow."

The increased strength and highs may result from the release of endorphins, the body's natural pain-reducing chemicals. Psychologist Jaak Panksepp of Bowling Green State University has been studying social and emotional processes in laboratory animals with a special emphasis on altruism. From his and other experiments, he concludes: "It is just about proven that it is our own natural opiates, the endorphins, that produce the good feelings that arise during social contact with others."

Frequent helpers who also exercise recognized the similarity of the effects. A woman who counsels abusive parents, for example, compared her "sense of fitness and well-being" to what she feels while swimming. Another, a nursing home volunteer, noted that although the work leaves her tired, it is the kind of fatigue one experiences after a good game of tennis.

Following the helping, many of the women reported experiencing a greater calmness and enhanced self-worth. One elderly woman ▶

wrote that doing something nice for someone actually snapped her out of periods of depression. Another reported more self-esteem after volunteer work.

What explains this greater calmness and sense of self-worth? "For millennia, people have been describing techniques on how to forget oneself, to experience decreased metabolic rates and blood pressure, heart rate and other health benefits," says Harvard cardiologist Herbert Benson, known for his work on the relaxation response, the body's ability to shift into a deep state of rest. "Altruism works this way, just as do yoga, spirituality and meditation."

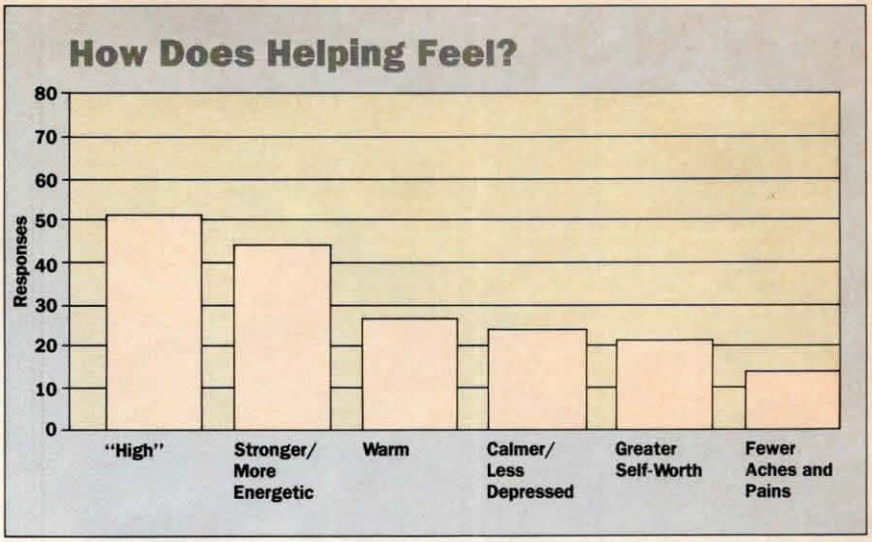
The helper's pleasurable physical sense and calmness is the opposite of the body's agitated condition under stress, in which the heart pumps harder, breathing is faster, organ functions are interfered with, and the body is more sensitive to pain. It is not usually physical stress, such as that involved in exercise, but emotional stress that causes the adrenal gland to release its stress chemicals, the corticosteroids. These increase cholesterol levels, play a role in heart disease, raise blood sugar and depress immune function. Such evidence begins to suggest why men involved in community organizations tend to have less disease and longer lives than those who do not serve.

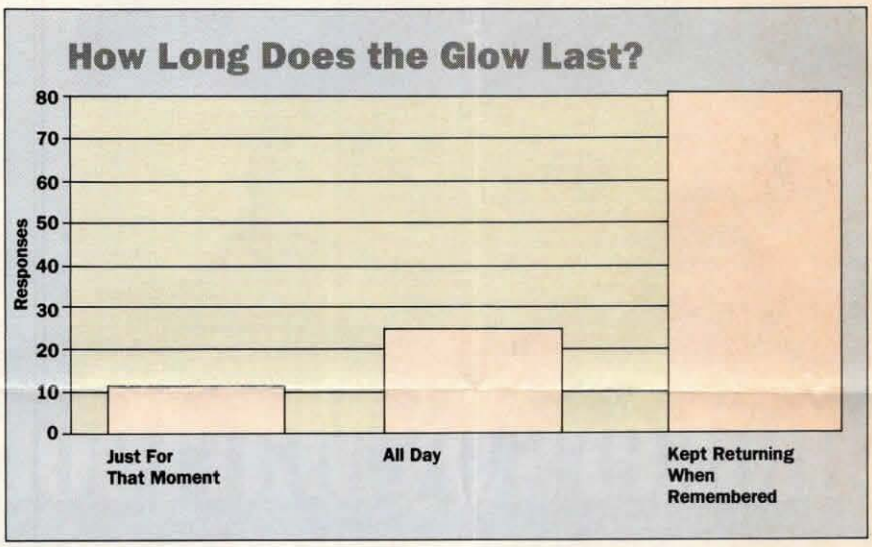
Helper's calm appears to be related to reduced emotional stress. One woman wrote that she treated her stress-related headaches by shopping for clothing for poor children. Another actually uses her volunteer work at a nursing home to keep her blood pressure under control. Thirteen percent of those surveyed noted a decrease in aches and pains.

Altruism has several advantages over exercise. Although the feel-good sensation is most intense when actually touching or listening to someone, it can apparently be recalled. Seventy percent of the magazine readers and 82 percent of the club members said their helper's highs would reoccur, though with less intensity, when they remembered helping.

Interestingly, altruism's pleasure does not appear to arise from donating money, no matter how important the cause, nor from volunteering without close personal contact. As one volunteer who makes recordings for the blind said, "They're important. But I only feel that good high when I'm with others, like assisting the free-lunch program."

Being in control is crucial to the health benefits of giving. If forced to help, for whatever reason, you may not benefit. People who have long-term duties caring for the elderly often report more, not less, stress and health problems. And a part-time student reported that when her volunteer activities interfere with her studying, they are no longer rewarding.





More than 70 percent of the 246 people who responded to the questionnaire reported a sensation associated with helping (top). About half commented on its endurance, most saying it returned when they recalled helping.

The responses in our two studies came from women, but they match the national volunteer profile for both sexes: primarily married, broadly representative in age and region. Close to nine out of ten committed volunteers say they are as healthy or healthier than others their age, matching nationwide surveys.

These are just a small start, of course, but they contribute to a growing body of literature on the health benefits of giving. Recently, a group of biobehavioral scientists headed up by biofeedback pioneer Neal Miller met to review the research, and they concluded that there is considerable evidence of various kinds to suggest that doing good may indeed be good for you. The probability that this is true is great enough, they agreed, to justify research specifically aimed at determining the conditions that will maximize such an effect.

Taking time to help, then, may be a basic step to protect health. Stress assaults us: Seventy percent of Americans say there is a lot or some stress in their lives, and 40 percent believe stress has made them sick. Yet only 25 percent volunteer regularly. Those who don't say they are too busy and don't want to neglect important responsibilities. The health benefits they're passing up may turn out to be only a part of their loss. At this early stage of altruism research, all those selfless people seem to have found ways into a wonderful glow. ■

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