

SPREADING HOLIDAY CHEER BY GIVING



What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of the holidays? Is it decorating your Christmas tree, planning that epic feast for the family, or conversely, retreating to a tropical haven in an effort to escape from anything even remotely Christmas-like? While these activities may play a key feature in how you celebrate, there is something else that perhaps captures the true spirit of the holidays: the act of giving. While giving can help those who are disadvantaged, it also benefits the “giver” in several ways. In this newsletter, we look at the tradition of giving during the holidays and how some simple acts of helping out can brighten and warm up the Season for everyone.



The act of giving or “altruism” during the holidays

While the concept of traditional gift-giving amongst family and friends is oftentimes a reciprocal one (i.e. it involves giving and receiving gifts), many individuals also spend time helping others during the holidays without expecting anything in return. It is this altruistic form of help that is considered most beneficial for the mental and physical well-being of an individual.

Benefits of Giving

1) Reduces stress

Many of us get bogged down by the daily stresses of our lives, which usually revolve around work or taking care of our families. Oftentimes, our usual stressors multiply during the holiday season when it seems like there is always a never-ending list of things to do. Volunteering or doing something kind for another person can provide us with a break from the daily grind and the stress associated with the holiday season. It also feels good knowing that you have helped pour a little bit of joy into another person’s life.

2) Alleviates depression and negative emotions

Helping or giving to others can also reduce symptoms of depression. A recent study published in the *Journal of Clinical Psychology* analyzed the results of two different methods of enhancing one’s sense of self-worth (a low sense of self-worth is often linked with depression). While one method focused on “self-image goals” or doing things to improve how others might perceive you, the other method focused on “compassionate goals”, that is, helping others. The results showed that compassionate goals lowered symptoms of depression while self-image goals actually exacerbated the symptoms.

Similarly, performing acts that are truly altruistic can help us feel happier and more fulfilled. A new study from the University of Sussex has found that both altruistic and strategic acts of kindness (i.e. when one expects something in return) trigger reward areas of the brain. However, altruistic acts of kindness activate a few other regions of the brain as well while producing what the researchers call the “warm glow” of kindness. Helping others often warms us up with a blissful feeling, as you may have experienced yourself from time to time.

In addition, activities such as volunteering provide us with an avenue to spend time with others and can therefore help combat loneliness, a major element of depression. This is especially helpful during the holiday season when feelings of isolation and loneliness may be more heightened than usual.



3) *Can improve physical health*

Providing help to others can also benefit our physical health. A 2013 study conducted by Carnegie Mellon University found that adults over the age of 50 who regularly volunteered had a significantly lower risk of developing hypertension than those who didn't volunteer. In addition to the benefits to cardiovascular health, researchers believe that the health benefits that one reaps from volunteering are related to the type of activity being performed. For instance, volunteering to help shovel someone's walkway can be beneficial for one's cardiovascular health while leading a holiday arts and crafts club can boost creativity and lower stress.

Ideas and tips for giving during the holiday time

Volunteer or give to a Charity

During the holiday time, many charitable organizations are looking for assistance in the form of volunteers or donations to support the local community. Here are a few examples:

- The Salvation Army – Christmas Kettle Campaign, Toy Mountain
- Covenant House – Christmas Backpack Program for homeless youth
- Local Women's Centre
- Local Christmas Bureau – donate toys for children or volunteer at a local branch
- BC Children's Hospital – annual Festival of Trees raises funds for urgent needs at the hospital
- Operation Red Nose (only offered at some locations) – volunteer to provide safe rides home
- Other local food banks and shelters



12 days of kindness

In addition to volunteering or giving to a charity, there are several other, less obvious, ways that you can help out during the holiday season (and all year round). Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Shovel snow from a neighbour's walkway or sidewalk
- Offer to babysit or pet-sit for a friend or loved one
- Call or meet up with someone who is going through a difficult time
- Bake some Christmas goodies for friends, family, neighbours, or co-workers
- Treat a colleague to a cup of coffee (or beverage of their choice)
- Offer someone your seat on public transit



What is wonderful about helping others is that it benefits everyone. It also encourages others (especially those receiving the help) to do their own bit in return for others. This is why it is said that kindness is contagious!