

## Benefits of Volunteering

A Presentation for the Oceanside Volunteer Association's Volunteer Fest  
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This presentation in a nutshell:

*When you volunteer, you help someone in need. Research is showing that when you do this regularly, your life will be longer, healthier, happier, and more meaningful.*

Presentation Notes:

### Brief history of volunteering in Canada:

Dr. Neena Chappell (2) gives this brief history of volunteering in Canada in her 1999 paper for Volunteer Canada:

- Early 1900's - need for social welfare created by industrialization. Charity was individual rather than organized.
- 1940's – The state became involved in social welfare with children's services and transfer of payments.
- 1950's, 1960's – growth of the welfare state in Canada: institutions and services for psychiatric care, criminal justice, developmentally handicapped, geriatric care
- 1960's 1970's – growth in the helping professions – social work, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech pathology, psychology, psychological testing, child development, community development
- 1980's - professional human service workers had largely displaced lay people including volunteers, who could not provide specialized professional service.
- 1990's - major shift by the governments of several world nations shifting responsibility back to the non-profit sector and withdrawing funds for institutional support
- 21<sup>st</sup> century, the trend continues, with public funding being withdrawn more and more, even from supporting non-profit organizations, so that the safety net for vulnerable persons now falls to the community.

Statistics Canada (13) just released the summary of their 2004 survey of giving, volunteering and participating:

- 45% of the Canadian population aged 15 and older volunteered their time to charities and other non-profit organizations.
- Although this survey is not strictly comparable with the one conducted in 1997, these results appear to be up from the 31.4% that was reported 10 years ago.
- When all types of volunteering and helping are combined, 83% of Canadians do this yearly.

## Volunteering is mostly about Helping People

Jane Ayers (1) and the Oceanside Volunteer Association project team of Kimberly Root, Camille LaBonte, Bryce Parry and Donna Jacobson, received 40 completed surveys from volunteers in Oceanside.

These volunteers most often mentioned helping people in some way as reasons for volunteering:

- to help people (21%),
- to make a difference (19%),
- to work w people (15%)

These 3 reasons constitute 55% of all the reasons mentioned by those who volunteer in Oceanside. As Berkeley psychologist Bruce Linton says, volunteering is about “caring for others and being cared about.”

## And people themselves can be naturally healing

People themselves, as themselves, can be healing:

- A Nuu-chah-nulth Oo-oo-shem
- The camaraderie in volunteer organizations
  - For example, OESS, Forward House, OVA, and the 34 non-profit organizations represented at this Volunteer Fest
  - Family of Origin, Family of Choice (one's volunteer family)
  - For example, this email sent to Bonnie Stone, an OVA volunteer. Even though permission was given to use it, I've changed all the names except Bonnie's: *Hello again Bonnie, I'm glad I've brightened your day. One of the best days in my life was when my partner pointed out your add in the local paper. I had been wallowing in it so to speak. I was lacking direction since my retirement from the Navy and volunteering was exactly what I needed. Not only am I volunteering with the residence at Trillium (teaching them computers) but I'm also assisting the staff in the same capacity. I love it and I have to be honest and say that I have met some wonderful people and made some amazing*

*friendships since I started volunteering. It has been a life changing experience for me. If you have ever wondered if you (meaning the Oceanside Volunteer Association) are of value to this community I'm here to tell you that your organization has changed my life. I will be forever grateful that I found you in the paper that day. As a volunteer I thought that I would be helping people and that is partly true. The absolute truth is that my life has been altered forever by the amazing seniors that I have met at Trillium. I was beginning to feel hopeless and then I met Charlotte. She found out that she had a brain tumour at the age of 79. The doctors had given up but Charlotte wasn't ready to give up. She had the surgery and lived to tell about it. She was in a coma for 1 whole year. The staff has told me that they never thought that she would have ever come out of it. Today I'm teaching Charlotte how to send email and play games on her computer and Charlotte is teaching me how to live.*

*Thanks again and never stop doing what you do. Mary [And thanks to "Mary" for this wonderful email!]*

These informal ideas about the healing potential of people in community are supported by research as well. In reviewing six different studies and reports, the Public Health Agency of Canada (12) reports that, *"Volunteer work improves the well-being of individual volunteers primarily, but not exclusively, by enhancing social support networks."* The Agency notes that,

- *"Support from family and friends acts as a buffer against stress and illness.*
- *People with more social contacts and stronger support networks have*
  - *Lower premature death rates,*
  - *Less heart disease,*
  - *Fewer health risk factors.*
- *Some experts have concluded that the health benefits of social relationships may be as important as health risks such as smoking, physical inactivity and high blood pressure.*
- *Social network size is consistently related to health and well-being.*
- *Social networks provide both emotional benefits and actual assistance in time of need.*
- *An individual's perception or awareness of the availability of support, regardless of the presence of a stressful circumstance, is health-enhancing."*

In order for these "Family of Choice" benefits to take place, volunteering needs to be shared with a consistent group of people. Musik, et. al. (9) have found a strong relationship between volunteering and longevity, but note that this relationship holds only when volunteers give at least 40 hours per year to a *single cause*. Volunteers who spread their volunteer time over several different agencies showed no longevity benefit whatsoever. I believe that this is easy to understand – it takes a while to build the kind of caring and accepting relationships that make a Family of Choice.

## Older volunteers report a better quality of life

Wheeler, Gorey and Greenblatt (14) reviewed 37 independent studies over 25 years (1968-1994), of which 34 were US and 3 were Canadian. They found that studies were typically correlational.

- This creates problems with cause-effect interpretation
- Even so, 70% of older volunteers report that they enjoy a quality of life that is greater than that of the average non-volunteer.

## One benefit of volunteering is personal happiness

Psychology Today (11) talks about the happiness that comes from social contact and volunteering:

- These things do not bring happiness: money, good looks, intelligence, youth.
- And these things do lead to happiness:
  - Developing good social skills
  - Volunteering
    - Volunteering and charity work generates more joy than anything except dancing
  - Getting married, or living together
  - Pursuing meaningful goals
  - Enjoying the process
  - Making purposeful progress
  - Enjoying the little things: being pleased frequently produces more well-being than being very happy once in a while.

Paul Whiteley of the U. of Essex (15) studied 101 randomly selected districts throughout the UK.

- Areas with the best reported quality of life also had the most volunteerism. They also had
  - Better health
  - Less crime
  - Saw themselves as “very satisfied” with their lives, and
  - Students in these districts got better grades on government exams
- These benefits held true regardless of the socioeconomic status of the districts

Sherrill Nixon (10) finds that volunteers are the most satisfied people in Australia, according to a survey of 2000 people conducted by Deakin U., Australian National U., Sydney U. and the insurer Australian Unity.

## Happiness is more than pleasure

Richard Davidson from the U. of Wisconsin (12) locates happiness in the left prefrontal lobe. This area shows a strong and sustained spike when a person is happy. Activity in this area is also associated with

- Elevated immune function (50% higher)
- Decreased death rates (50% lower)
- Prevalence of highly effective dopamine receptors in the limbic system

Limbic excitement by itself is associated only with pleasure (food, drugs, sex). When limbic excitement is combined with left prefrontal lobe excitement, the experience is happiness. This suggests that happiness is pleasure plus meaning (meaningful pleasure).

Kathleen McGowan (8) writing in *Psychology Today* suggests

- Relationships rather than material goods lead to lasting pleasure
- Volunteering breeds happiness
- Good social skills and solid networks of friends also give happiness

## Volunteering helps people stay mentally active

Katherine Ellison (4) writing in *Discover* magazine reviews the work of Michael Merzenich, a U. California at San Francisco researcher who has pioneered our current understanding of brain plasticity.

- We used to believe that an adult brain was relatively unadaptive and set in its ways.
- Merzenich has shown that adult brains still have plasticity (adaptability) and can still make new neural connections and grow new neurons.
- The “use it or lose it” and “no strain, no gain” viewpoints on physical fitness also seem to apply to brain plasticity and mental fitness:
  - When retired people just seek rest and relaxation, they don’t realize that this contributes to brain shrinkage.
  - 50% of North Americans develop significant cognitive impairment by age 85 including dementia
  - Reversed plasticity – brain shrinks, cerebral cortex thins; drop in neurotransmitters; all of these combine to produce noisy reception.
- Restoring brain plasticity:
  - Merzenich’s Posit Science Brain Fitness software program creates greater blood flow in the hippocampal region (memory).
    - Making subtle distinctions builds more clarity and focus
    - Novelty and reward increases release of neurotransmitters like dopamine, serotonin, norepinephrine, which enable plasticity.
    - Develop higher signal-to-noise ratio
  - Average improvement equal to 10 years younger on memory performance

## Health benefits of volunteering

The US government website Get Involved (5) lists several health benefits that have been documented to be associated with volunteering:

- Less heart disease
- Fewer health risk factors
- Lower heart rate and blood pressure
- Increased endorphin production
- Buffers the impact of stress
- Boosts the social factors that healthy people have
- Less insomnia
- Strengthened immune system
- Hastens surgery recovery time
- Increases physical activity

On the other side of the coin, Lubben, et. al. (7) have shown a relationship between hospitalization and the lack of a social network that is as strong as the relationship between smoking and mortality that led to the Surgeon General's warning on cigarette packages.

## Longevity benefits of volunteering

In a study reported at the March 2004 Annual Meeting of the American Psychosomatic Society in Vancouver, BC, Alex Harris (6) examined data from the Longitudinal Study of Aging that looked at 7,527 Americans age 70 or older. *This study controlled the effects of demographics, health status, physical activity and social support. After controlling these factors,*

- Frequent volunteers still had a 19% reduction in mortality risk compared to non-volunteers. On top of that,
- Volunteers who also visited with friends or attended religious services lived an additional 30% longer than volunteers who did not.

To me this quirky 30% bonus is suggestive of Family of Choice and meaningful caring.

Musik, et. al. (9) discovered a dramatic link between volunteering and longevity. They surveyed 1,211 adults over 65 in 1986 and checked up on them eight years later. Those who had volunteered at least 40 hours each year to a single cause were 40% more likely than non-volunteers to be alive at the end of the study.

## Forward House revisited: rediscovering joy by turning work into play

- You can turn play into work by paying someone to play
- You can turn work into play by asking them to work for free

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