

# OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Dr. Edwin Lau

## Help Yourself: Volunteer!

*At Thanksgiving, many people express gratitude for the blessings in life by helping those who are less fortunate. It feels good psychologically to lend a hand, but Dr. Lau notes that there is scientific proof that volunteering can make you physically healthier, too.*

Cultures around the world set aside special days to show thanks. Family and friends gather to express appreciation for each other, as well as life's bounty. We often donate time and energy to helping others, who, in return, are often then inspired and in a position to volunteer their time. It's a fulfilling exchange for both giver and recipient.

Dr. Lau encourages patients to volunteer for a cause dear to them. While it feeds the soul to pitch in, good Samaritans are showered with a cascade of other benefits, including better health. Henry David Thoreau explained that "goodness is the only investment that never fails." Dr. Lau agrees that volunteering improves physical health — and has unearthed research to confirm it.

### Chiropractors: Setting an Example

In addition to supplying a substantial

amount of care to under-served and rural populations (*Am J Public Health* 2002;92:2001-9), chiropractors also contribute many unpaid hours of professional time. In fact, doctors of chiropractic serve a vital role in the health-care safety net for a diverse group of patients (*J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 2007;30:718-28).

After the tragedy in New York City on Sept. 11, 2001, the workers at Ground Zero were quickly overwhelmed by stress and emotion. Wanting to do something to help, chiropractor Dr. Patrick McNeil, D.C., rushed to the site and offered free chiropractic care to people toiling there.

"It's more than just relieving pain or tension," said McNeil. "I can't imagine loving somebody more than giving them an adjustment...To have a guy get adjusted and stand up and say, 'Wow, I feel a whole lot better'...is something." McNeil feels lucky to



have been able to make a difference during a national crisis.

### Why Do People Volunteer?

People volunteer for a spectrum of reasons, ranging from pure altruism (unselfishness) to the promise of political gain (*Health Care Manag* 2008;27:159-64). Perceived rewards also vary from person to person, with some merely looking for new personal challenges and experiences (*Br Dent J* 2008;204:275-7). The opportunity to travel is also motivational for many.

However, many people who never expect to volunteer may be struck suddenly with the desire to help. This was true for thousands of vacationers in Thailand in 2004 when a massive tsunami roared ashore. *National Geographic Adventure Magazine* reported that while many tourists fled, an overwhelming number stayed and "worked hand in hand" to tend to the injured.

### The Reward of Better Health and Longevity

The powerful feeling that one "matters" should not be underestimated. There is a proven link between volunteering and health (*J Health Soc Behav* 2007;48:450-64). Analysis also finds that helping others is especially advantageous for anyone who has been isolated socially.



Dr. Edwin Lau, Dr. Edwin Lau Chiropractic (604) 642-6464  
1202 Homer Street, Vancouver, BC V6B 2Y5 [www.edwinlauchiropractic.com](http://www.edwinlauchiropractic.com)



Productive engagement is a “potential pathway to health” that is enriched by the number and diversity of activities in which a person participates (*Health Soc Work* 2006;31:275-88). In other words: The more you give, the more you get.

Can volunteering lead to a longer life? Yes. A new study of volunteers over the age of 60 found that donating one’s time is associated with reduced mortality, even after age, gender and physical health are factored in (*Int Psychogeriatr* 2008;20:1000-13).

Additional research verifies that volunteerism leads to better health and greater happiness, regardless of the volunteer’s socio-economic status (*Soc Sci Med* 2008;66:23221-34). Researchers suspect that the health boost comes from the volunteer’s increased empathy. Doing good deeds can also positively refocus aspirations and life goals.

### **Bonus Benefits**

Volunteers often enjoy bonuses they never could have predicted. For instance, nursing students who donated professional services in Cambodia reported that the mission had strengthened their clinical skills and enhanced their understanding of primary health-care (*Can Nurse* 2006;102:29-31). The nurses said the encounter with cultural diversity and immersion also informed their work back home.

Citizens who poured into the Gulf Coast area of the US to clean up after Hurricane Katrina became part of the largest volunteer response in American history — more than 1 million people.

According to an article in *USA Today*, for many, the experience renewed their appreciation for life in general. Others say the warm feelings that came from filling the need after a disaster have been endlessly rewarding.

### **Benefits for the Recipients of Volunteer Care**

Recipients of aid provide a singular perspective regarding their helpers. As beneficiaries of charity, disadvantaged people say they are often inspired by those who assist them (*Tech Hand Up Extrem Surg* 2007;11:198-203).

For some, the help from volunteers is preferred to that of paid staff (*Int J Offender Ther Comp Criminol* 2008 Epub). In these cases, unpaid helpers set a “living example” of human goodness, which demonstrates that society cares. For at-risk teens, this perception could redirect their intentions toward helping others.

Studies show that a caring nature is contagious. One investigation demonstrates that adolescents who volunteer are good influences on their friends. Researchers also noticed significant reductions in depression, alcohol

abuse and problem behaviors among teens whose friends are volunteers (*Dev Psychol* 2008;44:1081-94).

### **The Benefits of Volunteer Work Among Senior Citizens**

Active senior citizens spend vast amounts of time helping others, whether through care-giving, volunteering or by lending a hand to a neighbor (*J Aging Soc Policy* 2008;20:141-64). Over time, this altruistic spirit produces an ever-widening increase in life satisfaction (*J Gerontol B Psychol Sci Soc Sci* 2000;55:S308-18).

People who are widowed are more likely to pursue volunteering, and are grateful to have the opportunity to do so (*J Gerontol B Psychol Sci Soc Sci* 2007;62:S257-66). They discover that helping others is a tonic that can vanquish grief and depression (*Pers Soc Psychol Bull* 2008;34:849-61). As George Washington Carver noted: “If you want to lift yourself up, lift up someone else.”

Social scientists suggest that communities develop policies that encourage older adults to volunteer so their vast resources can be shared with others (*J Gerontol B Psychol Sci Soc Sci* 2003;58:S137-45). It’s a win-win situation for everyone.

### **Acts of Kindness All Around**

Is this the right time for you to think about volunteering? Remember, everyone has something to offer. Take a look around our community, and you’ll quickly find ways to pitch in. Ask us for more ideas about how volunteering can improve your life and your health.

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