



Are we happier and healthier when we serve others?

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Consider the following scenario:

A group of optometrists spend weeks organizing an international humanitarian clinic. Most participants spend their money and resources on air tickets, frames, medications, and carrying the necessary equipment. They also spend many hours visiting a distant location or village. They examine patients for 8-12 hours for several days, sometimes in challenging environments. They provide patients with eyeglasses, medications, and referrals to receive the additional care they need. At the end of the day, they are very exhausted. Yet, despite the fatigue, they have a unique feeling of excitement. The rush of endorphins creates a psychological high that can be felt but is difficult to explain.

This scenario repeats itself hundreds of times year after year. It exemplifies the commitment of many VOSH and SVOSH chapters. Our work creates a unique sense of accomplishment.

Are we happier when we serve others? Are we healthier? What does neuroscience tell us?

In 2017, neuroscientists from Switzerland, the USA, and Germany challenged people to conduct generous acts. People who devoted more to becoming generous had a greater sense of happiness. They also showed changes in their brains. Happiness was correlated with activity in the ventral striatum (1).

A 2018 study showed that when we support someone we know (versus support for a general cause), we have a greater feeling of social connection. The brain shows less activity in the amygdala, implying stress reduction. Helping someone we know reduces stress. (2)

Doing good can also affect our genes. A study showed that kindness to others might help improve our health by changing how certain genes are expressed. This change means lower risks of diseases linked to stress and inflammation, such as heart disease (3)

Volunteering also promotes better health-seeking behavior. Volunteers are likelier to use preventive health services and spend fewer nights at the hospital. (4)

Studies show that recalling doing the good can be as rewarding as doing the good (5). Spend some time remembering your good deeds. This benefit is one reason we have requested our chapters tell us their stories.

These studies corroborate what we all know about. Doing the good helps the world. But it also improves the well-being of those who serve. Having the evidence of the benefits, perhaps it is time that all our schools and colleges of optometry fully support and promote our SVOSH chapters for the good of the world and our students.

References:

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