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GIVE BACK

BECAUSE A LITTLE BIT OF EFFORT CAN MAKE A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE *By Will Palmer*

it's good for you!

Bad news for selfish bastards: A new wave of studies shows that altruistic people not only live longer; they also lead healthier, less stressful lives. "Researchers have all but proven that people actively engaged in supportive behavior reap their own rewards in mental and physical health," says Stephen Post, a professor of bioethics at Cleveland's Case Western Reserve University and co-author (with Jill Neimark) of *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*, out in May from Random House.

Biologists have long known that when we help others—whether by distributing outdoorwear to disaster victims or taking disabled athletes out on the ski slopes—our brains release the same endorphins responsible for a runner's high, inducing feelings of well-being, reducing stress, and even strengthening the immune system. Now, dozens of studies funded by the—ahem—Institute for Research on Unlimited Love, a nonprofit Post set up in 2001 to study benevolence, are turning up longer-term benefits. Scientists who observed volunteers over the course of decades concluded that anxiety and depression dropped significantly for those who gave help, even more than for those who received it. Elsewhere, altruistic people were shown to have more success in relationships. And people who volunteered were up to 63 percent more likely to live a longer life. "I'd argue with Billy Joel when he sings about the good dying young," Post says. "What we're finding is that actually the good tend to do a little better."

The key, it seems, is personal involvement. "I would never take anything away from someone who writes a check," says Post, "but there's no doubt that direct helpfulness, as long as it doesn't overwhelm the giver, has tremendous health benefits." So do it for your heart *and* your ticker.

lend a little

Microfinancing—making small, interest-free business loans to impoverished people in developing countries—is all the buzz. See firsthand what a difference it can make by investing as little as \$25 at kiva.org, a San Francisco-based site that works with micro-credit groups around the world to help entrepreneurs like Agnes Meseno Silei, who's seeking a grand total of \$300 to start a bead-work business in Kenya. You'll choose your loan recipient (Kiva features photos and bios) and receive regular e-mail updates about his or her progress. And you'll likely get your money back within two years—loans are not guaranteed, but Kiva has a 100 percent repayment rate—just in time to reinvest and help someone else find economic independence.

meet your match

Still not sure how you can best get involved? Spend a few minutes at volunteermatch.org. This nonprofit Web site features a database of more than 38,000 volunteer options across the country, categorized by location and theme (environmental projects, human-rights issues, etc.), plus "virtual" opportunities that let deskbound do-gooders give at any time and from any place. If you're a lawyer living in Kansas City, for example, you can advise on the cases of local foster kids. Outside types in Atlanta can choose from dozens of ideas, like maintaining trails, caring for sick wildlife, and designing or editing Web pages.

share your sport

Juan Herrera is a 23-year-old kid from the salty-aired but sometimes mean streets of San Diego. Adopted as a child in Tijuana, moved from family to family, and homeless by high school, he was on a trajectory toward gangs, drugs, and no way out—until one day the way out came, in the form of a nonprofit called Outdoor Outreach. Founded by former competitive skier Chris Rutgers to get challenged teens out of the rehab center and into the wilderness, the program transformed Herrera, whose sporting life to that point consisted of kicking around his neighborhood on a BMX bike, into a maestro on the singletrack, in the halfpipe, and on the Southern California granite.

Today Herrera is an Outdoor Outreach staff member who spends every weekend with about a dozen kids, ages 12 to 18, going surfing or mountain-biking in San Diego County, snowboarding at Mammoth, and scaling cliffs in Mission Gorge. "At first it's really common for them to be scared," he says, "but once they see their friends having fun, I guarantee by the end of the day all of them are climbing.

"For these kids, life is about day-to-day survival," he adds, "so for me to give them the opportunity that was given to me—that's what's important. I could've ended up a junkie; now I'm an adrenaline junkie." He's also an "Outdoor Idol," according to the Outdoor Industry Foundation, which this year honored Herrera and seven others—including kayaker Rush Sturges, 21, and 20-year-old climber Emily Harrington—for both excelling in their sports and inspiring the next generation to do the same.

The idea that getting outside can have mental as well as physical benefits has been gathering momentum since the 1960s, when Outward Bound and NOLS introduced young people to the backcountry and watched them morph into more confident versions of themselves. These days, athletes from world-class competitors to weekend enthusiasts are following suit: Golden, Colorado's Big City Mountaineers, founded by the American Hiking Society's Jim Kern, takes kids backpacking and canoeing; First Descents, established in 2001 by pro kayaker Brad Ludden, teaches whitewater paddling to young adults with cancer, while fellow pro Willie Kern spends his time in China with the Yunnan Great Rivers Project, building ecotourism programs for the benefit of the locals and their endangered rivers.

For the rest of us, it's a no-brainer. Whether your passion is ice climbing, sailing, or cycling, sharing it with other people means you're changing lives while doing what you love. To get started, browse the Outdoor Industry Foundation's database at outdoorindustryfoundation.org/programsearch.php.