

The Benefits of Generosity



By Lisa Firestone

The Dalai Lama famously said, "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion." The same is certainly true for generosity! Generosity – the quality of being kind and understanding, the willingness to give others things that have value – is often defined as an act of selflessness; however, studies are now showing that generosity is actually (selfishly) in *your* best interest. Practicing generosity is a mental health principle, and it could be the very key to a happy and healthy life.

Year after year, more and more studies are highlighting the benefits of generosity on both our physical and mental health. Not only does generosity reduce stress, support one's physical health, enhance one's sense of purpose, and naturally fight depression, it is also shown to increase one's lifespan.

If a longer, less stressful and more meaningful life is not enough to inspire you to rev up your practice of generosity, consider that generosity also promotes a social connection and improves relationships. According to Jason Marsh and Jill Suttie of the Greater Good Science Center, "When we give to others, we don't only make them feel closer to us; we also feel closer to them." This is because being generous and kind encourages us to perceive others in a more positive light and fosters a sense of community, a feeling of interconnectedness.

Being generous also makes us feel better about ourselves. Generosity is both a natural confidence builder and a natural repellent of self-hatred. By focusing on what we are giving rather than on what we are receiving, we create a more outward orientation toward the world, which shifts our focus away from ourselves. While maintaining a healthy level of self-awareness and sensitivity to oneself is important, too often we narrow in on ourselves with a negative lens. We spend too much time listening to the "critical inner voice" in our heads, which scrutinizes our every move and nags at us with negative thoughts towards ourselves and others. These negative thoughts undermine our confidence and can lead to self-sabotage. Being generous distracts us from the critical inner voice's barrage of nasty thoughts and creates a strong argument against it as well. When we see someone else benefiting from our kind actions, for instance, it is hard for the inner voice to argue that we are worthless.

Four Steps to Fully Practicing Generosity

- **Give something that is sensitive to the other person.**

Generosity is most effective when the gift you offer is sensitive. Think about what the other person wants or needs. It's not always about material things; it's about being giving of yourself. Sometimes just being present and available to a loved one who is having a hard time is the greatest gift you could possibly give.

- **Accept appreciation.**

It is important to be open to the people who express appreciation toward you. Generosity is a two-way street, allowing someone to express their gratitude is an important aspect of generosity and part of what makes you feel closer to them. As researchers in the Department of Psychology at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have discovered, "The emotion of gratitude uniquely functions to build a high-quality relationship between a grateful person and the target of his or her gratitude, that is, the person who performed a kind action." So it is important to not brush off a "thank you" with comments like "Oh, it was nothing."

- **Accept the generosity of others.**

Some people have a much easier time being giving than receiving. However, it is important to let others do things for you. I call this *the generosity of acceptance*. Being pseudo-independent or self-denying robs your loved ones of the opportunity to feel the joy of giving. Accepting the generosity of others may make you uncomfortable if you felt unlovable or unworthy in your early life. Generosity is often an act of love, and, though it may seem counterintuitive, many people respond negatively to being loved.

- **Show appreciation.**

Remember that gratitude is an important part of the equation. Show your appreciation for the generosity that is directed toward you, even if you feel shy or uncomfortable. Resist the temptation to say things like "This is too much," or "You shouldn't have." Instead just say "Thank you!" Or, better yet, let the person know what their generosity meant to you. Generosity is truly the gift that keeps on giving. Each day life presents us with hundreds of opportunities to be generous; by making a lifestyle out of generosity, we can do ourselves and others a world of good.