

DOING GOOD?

Altruism and wellbeing
in an age of austerity

**Mental Health
Awareness Week 2012**



mental
health
foundation

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Design
SEA

**DOING
GOOD
DOES YOU
GOOD**

Ralph Waldo Emerson

‘It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself...’

Executive summary

Altruism means caring about other people and acting in someone else's interest. We may be acting altruistically whenever we offer someone our seat on the bus, make a cup of tea for a work colleague, donate money to a famine relief fund, or comfort a friend in distress.

The desire to do good deeds for other people is natural and deep-rooted, but often misunderstood. Evolutionary biologists, sociologists and philosophers have tried to comprehend why we act in this way, particularly if we do something for another person which is against our own interest.

Ultimately, altruism is a mystery we have yet to solve. We do not know whether actions such as helping others, sharing, caring for others, volunteering and donating are wholly selfless or whether they are rooted in self-interest. Our motives may be a mixture of the two.

Helping other people and engaging in these kinds of prosocial behaviour has many advantages. It can improve our social relationships, give our lives new purpose, show us other perspectives on our own problems, improve the chances of others reciprocating our good deed, and make us more attractive to the opposite sex. Helping others may even produce a sense of euphoria akin to the sensation we get when eating good food.

We have probably all met people who seem selfish and others who seem helpful beyond reason. Being at an extreme of selfishness or selflessness can cause problems both for the individual and those around them. Being too selfish can lead to isolation and poor social relationships, whereas being too selfless can lead to overburden and stress. We are each responsible for our approach to helping others.

There are simple, spontaneous ways in which anyone can act selflessly, such as holding a door open for a stranger. There are also structured, more time consuming ways of helping others, such as volunteering for a charity or becoming part of a Time Banking scheme (where you give an hour of your time in exchange for an hour of someone else's time). Evidence suggests that people, particularly older people, can gain a great deal from formal volunteering, which can reduce social isolation and improve health.

The UK, like much of the world, is going through difficult times. Unemployment is high whilst state support for vulnerable people is decreasing. In a recent national opinion survey we asked 2,037 people how they felt about acts of kindness such as being helpful or volunteering¹. The majority (76%) agreed with the statement that society had become more selfish and materialistic, and 67% thought people were less likely to be kind to strangers than 10 years ago.

The results of the poll also suggest that people still 'do good' on a regular basis; 83% said that they held a door open for a stranger in the past week, 72% had let someone go ahead of them in a queue, and 33% had volunteered time or resources to help someone else. The vast majority also said that they felt good after being kind (87%) and that being kind had a positive influence on their health (80%).

Despite the problems that our society faces, there are things we can all do for others that can improve the world we live in. We recommend that:

— Schools, nurseries and playgroups encourage acts of kindness, peer support and a culture of volunteering from childhood. These should be embedded into existing citizenship activities and mental health promotion programmes. Schools, universities and colleges should encourage children and young people to volunteer in local communities as part of curriculum activity.

— Employers promote mentally healthy workplaces through encouraging altruistic activities at work, they should also recognise the role of peer mentoring schemes and volunteering programmes with regards to workforce development.

— Voluntary sector organisations support people who are approaching retirement. This support should aim to redefine people's identities so that they can continue to see themselves as contributing members of the community.

— Commissioners of services aiming to support vulnerable groups should invest in volunteering and peer support services. This is relevant to socially isolated groups such as older people, people with mental health problems, people with learning disabilities, those with physical disabilities and long term illnesses. Supporting people to contribute may result in reciprocal community support networks being developed.

— Government prioritise investment in third sector organisations designed to promote volunteering and Time Banks. These organisations need to be supported to create further opportunities for those most isolated to contribute. Training for voluntary sector staff should be provided to help people engage with potential volunteers who may require additional support.

Sir Winston Churchill

‘We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.’

Case Study: Mentoring young people in schools

‘My name is Mark. I am 25 years old. I enjoyed school initially but later failed to uphold my studies due to issues happening at home and also coming of age. This led me to being influenced by negative people. My studies suffered due to my early cannabis use and association with undesirables at school, leading me to drop out at 16.

Unemployed and deflated I was heavily using cannabis and getting involved in criminal activity. I was first arrested at the age of 15 for a robbery charge that was later dropped to a common assault charge. I received a caution and a youth offender team referral.

In 2009 I met Charlie who was working with some of the UK’s most deprived young people through MAC-UK’s Music And Change project. We then devised a project in which we taught music workshops for young people, thus creating Mini-MAC.

The aim of Mini-MAC is to promote positive mental health to vulnerable and at risk young people through music in schools, such as DJ-ing, MC-ing, lyric writing, music production and music performance. It is a great way of improving self-esteem, confidence and creativity.

I have seen many things over the years and been in a number of situations where I have feared for my life. But through my own personal determination, perseverance and help through Mini-MAC, I have been able to change my life for the positive.

Working with Mini-MAC has given me a platform to pursue my own ambitions of helping young people who are facing similar situations that I experienced when I was younger. When I work with the young people I feel like I am contributing to their positive individual development. This motivates me to continue working as I do. I feel this work is crucial in promoting community cohesion in my own and similar communities. I am currently studying a youth work managerial degree and I am a Tutor at Mini-MAC.’

Case study: Mentoring young people

21 year old Lily managed to deal with her mental health problems by attending a self-management course for others with similar experiences.

‘I became homeless after dropping out of college because of a severe mental health condition. Nothing I had done to try and treat the condition had worked so I decided to give self-management a go.

After a while it inspired me to suggest creating a course specifically designed for young people like myself who were going through similar experiences. Young people are often worried about the stigma attached to mental health issues and we hope that being with other people our own age will help us feel more comfortable to talk about our experiences. I now have the confidence to become a course facilitator and share everything that I’ve learnt to help other young people.

Helping other young people has given me a different perspective on my own problems and I’ve realised that many other people were in similar positions or even worse off than I was. I’ve found this experience worthwhile and beneficial for my own mental health and wellbeing.’

The selfish society?

Words like ‘selfishness’ and ‘selflessness’ are charged with emotional, moral and political meaning. Their virtues are often discussed. Should we be selfish, or more selfless? To what extent should we put the needs of others before our own? Or should we shun the needs of others in order to look after ourselves and our families?

The UK faces challenging and unstable times. Weaknesses in traditional economic models have been exposed; resources have become scarcer and less affordable. The Coalition Government’s ‘Big Society’ agenda aims to take responsibility away from central authority and place it in the hands of the people, but such rhetoric requires resources, structure and thought in order to be made a reality.

History is filled with examples of human beings collaborating through times of hardship; for example, collective rebuilding efforts following World War II or the thousands who offered refuge to the people of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. Similarly, there are examples of hardship leading to civil unrest, from the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 through to the miners’ strikes of the 1980s and the 2011 riots. Difficult times can divide people but they can also ignite collective responsibility.

What about our present situation? We conducted an independent poll of 2,037 people across the country of which 76% believed that society was becoming more selfish and materialistic and 67% thought people were less likely to be kind to strangers than 10 years ago¹. Although anecdotal, these figures indicate where society thinks it is heading. Seldom have words such as ‘selfishness’ and ‘selflessness’ meant as much as they do now.

Altruism is not a common word. It means caring about others’ welfare and acting to benefit them. It is a combination of benevolence, charity, compassion, and friendship, and includes *prosocial behaviours* such as sharing, donating, cooperating and volunteering². We may behave altruistically whenever we offer someone a seat on the bus, make a cup of tea for a work colleague, donate money to a famine relief fund, or comfort a friend whose relationship has ended.

The concept of altruism has been central to Western philosophy for millennia; Aristotle alluded to it in *Nicomachean Ethics* (4th Century BCE). The term was first coined by Auguste Comte in 1851³ who believed that some human behaviour represented an unselfish desire to ‘live for others’. He distinguished altruism from egoism; which is the belief that we always act in our own self-interest.

Motive distinguishes altruism from egoism. The concept of Karma in Buddhism holds that ‘good’ deeds cause harm unless they result from ‘good’ motives. In other words, the primary goal of altruism is to improve another’s welfare. We may help ourselves as a consequence of being altruistic, but this is a secondary benefit. On the other hand, the primary goal of egoism is to improve our own welfare. We may help others along the way, but this is a secondary benefit⁴.

Traditional children’s stories and fairy tales often portray altruism and selflessness as virtues. In Aesop’s Fables and Grimms’ Fairy tales, the caring and generous character thrives, whilst the selfish character suffers. In ‘A Christmas Carol’ by Charles Dickens, the character of Ebenezer Scrooge becomes happier when he becomes nicer. Modern children’s stories often focus on self-satisfaction and reward, where a character has their wishes granted for behaving in a ‘good’ manner⁵.

Altruism is of interest to evolutionary biologists, sociologists and philosophers. Genetic and evolutionary factors explain some altruistic acts; all life is defined by genes that encourage living things to behave in certain ways, which in turn ensures the genes’ survival and continuation⁶. Emperor Penguins, for example, huddle together during Antarctic winters to avoid freezing to death and to ensure the next generation’s survival, not because they are being nice to each other.

Kin selection theory predicts that we will be most altruistic towards relatives with whom we share the most genes. The chances of our genes surviving improve when we help our relatives survive. We are (usually) 50% genetically related to siblings, parents and children, 25% to nieces and nephews, and 12.5% to cousins. Some research shows that adopted children, on average, get smaller inheritance shares than biological children⁷.

As the evolutionary biologist JBS Haldane once joked, “I would lay down my life for two brothers or eight cousins”. Some animals take this one step further; the worker bees in a beehive cannot reproduce, but they share 50–75% of their genes with each member of the hive; they are genetically invested in the hive’s survival.

Cooperation has social advantages; one example of cooperation in humans is *reciprocal altruism*. Examples occur whenever we give something in order to receive something in the future; the person we helped is expected to respond in kind when we need a favour from them.

Reciprocal altruism between two or more people can be explained using a scenario called the *Prisoner’s Dilemma*. The dilemma is that each individual gains an advantage by betraying the others rather than cooperating with them; however, if all parties chose to betray each other then everyone loses out. The following example is an adaptation of the Prisoner’s Dilemma:

Steven wins an eBay auction to buy a watch from Mark for £50 (plus postage). Steven could send the money to Mark, who in turn could send the watch and both would benefit from the exchange.

However, either party would stand to gain more from the exchange if they betrayed the other person; if Steven sent the money but Mark did not send the watch then Mark keeps the watch and gains £50, Steven gets nothing (except what is known as ‘the sucker’s payoff’). Mark gets the sucker’s payoff if the roles are reversed. However, if both men betray each other they both lose the time and effort associated with an auction that came to nothing, they may also develop a reputation as timewasting traders.

Altruism; from the French, altruisme, from *autrui*: ‘other people’, derived from Latin *alter*: ‘other’

Over time, cooperation is more advantageous than betrayal. Betraying may have benefits in the short-term, but it is problematic in the longer term because we remember how others have treated us in the past. We often tell others when someone has treated us badly, which damages the reputation of the betrayer.

The popular BBC television programme 'The Apprentice' shows many examples of cooperation and betrayal. Contestants will cooperate in order to win a task, but if they believe that the task is failing, they sometimes betray each other in order to save themselves. This reaches its climax in 'the boardroom' situation, where each contestant makes choices to cooperate or betray, depending on what they stand to lose. This scenario is repeated each week, so people are aware of who has cooperated with them and/or betrayed them in the past.

Reciprocal altruism is emotive. We may develop feelings of duty to people who have helped us and feelings of spite or anger to those who have betrayed us. Other possible emotions include gratitude to the neighbour who pushes our car on a cold winter morning, obligation to return the favour at some point in the future, guilt about the person you forgot to wish 'Happy Birthday' to, and anger about the person who did not offer you a seat on the bus even though you were wearing a plaster cast on your leg.

A 'Time Bank' is an example of structured reciprocal altruism. This is a group of 'bankers' who make deposits to and withdrawals from a system where time is the currency. Bankers accrue 'credit' through helping other bankers. They can then 'spend' this credit by getting other bankers to help them with something. For example, one banker could offer child care in exchange for having their house cleaned by another, who in turn gains credit to call upon a favour from other bankers.

Engaging in reciprocal altruism influences our reputation and increases our social capital; improving the quality and quantity of our social relationships with others. Being known as a fair person improves the chances that others will cooperate with us. Being known as a cheat or freeloader has the opposite effect. We need to be able to detect and punish cheating in order for the system to work¹⁰. This is why online stores have customer feedback systems; the store can enhance its reputation through feedback from satisfied customers, just as it can damage its reputation through feedback from unsatisfied customers.

Sometimes we witness people acting altruistically in public. We may act this way in public in order to impress others; such gestures may improve our status amongst people who witness our altruistic act. A common example is when we perceive politicians as giving time to local causes, gaining exposure and press coverage, and in turn increasing their popularity. This can backfire if we are seen to be 'doing good' in order to 'do well' for ourselves¹¹. Such public displays of altruism are less likely to be reciprocated than private ones¹².

Most of the acts described so far may not seem altruistic, since most of them are influenced by self-interest. This does not debunk the idea of 'pure' altruism. We may see this in the aftermath of tragic world events; \$14 billion was raised across the world for the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. This sort of behaviour cannot be explained through kin selection (the people we help are not related to us), reciprocation (we will never meet them and have little chance of gaining anything from them in return), or status (we may give anonymously or through channels which will offer no public boost to our reputation).

The concept of *empathy* may explain altruism. Empathic concern is the ability to recognise others' emotions and then to help them. We are more likely to help someone if we have empathic concern for the person in distress; people often give to charities if they have a personal interest in the cause.

Children as young as 12 months show compassion towards companions in distress¹³ and at 14–18 months children appear to act altruistically without being asked, praised or rewarded¹⁴.

The *empathy–altruism hypothesis*⁴ suggests that empathic concern evokes true altruism, since the ultimate motivation is to benefit the person in distress. Alternatively, the *negative-state relief model*¹⁵ suggests that we help people in distress because witnessing others' distress makes us feel bad, "empathic distress is unpleasant and helping the victim is usually the best way to get rid of the source"¹⁶.

Whether true altruism exists is a philosophical question we have yet to answer. Recently, altruism was listed as one of ten unexplained mysteries about human behaviour¹⁷. Debates around altruism theories continue, perhaps empathy and stress relief both contribute towards an explanation. Supporters of the empathy altruism hypotheses argue that people who feel sympathy are more likely to help someone in distress than people who feel personal distress only^{18 19}.

Supporters of the negative-state relief model argue that people are less likely to help someone in distress when there is an easier way to physically and psychologically escape the situation.

Displaying altruism and selflessness towards others can be sexually attractive.⁸

Men put on their best behaviour when attractive ladies are close by. When the scenario is reversed, women's behaviour remains the same.⁹

Galatians

‘Whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap.’

Case study: Volunteering

‘How have I found my experience as a mentor? Well, just simply I would have to say without a doubt that it’s given me a much ‘Brighter Future’.

Susan, Brighter Future’s Volunteer Mentor

Brighter Futures is a project designed to support isolated people in later life through peer mentoring support. Susan, aged 62, joined the project as a volunteer within its first year and had previously spent her career working as a registered nurse. Susan’s working life ended abruptly after the care home she worked in closed down. This was a very traumatic event for her as overnight she lost all of her support networks and purpose in life. In the early days of her redundancy she realised that her husband had a very full and busy life that didn’t include her and that her children were old enough to live independent lives. She described feeling that she was no longer needed and struggling to find a reason to get out of bed.

After a time she realised that she had developed a depressive illness and sought help from her GP who referred her to specialist mental health services. As part of her journey of recovery she began to explore options within volunteering.

On contacting Brighter Futures, Susan immediately felt she had made the right decision and after joining the training programme she met other volunteers and quickly developed friendships within the group. During her time within Brighter Futures, Susan supported a number of isolated older people, some by providing individual mentoring support, but she also helped to run group sessions where she feels her skills were best used. She is now considering part-time work in the caring field but intends to continue to volunteer as she feels that volunteering with the project has completely changed her life and that after experiencing a very bleak time, she now feels that she has a hopeful future.

Case study: Charity fundraising

‘Because of my run I have been selected to carry the Olympic torch on July 12th – I am so proud to do this and represent mental health in this positive way.’

‘Last year I ran 42 marathons in 7 weeks to raise awareness of the benefits good nutrition and exercise have on mental health. My journey took me through England, Scotland and Wales. I was totally dependent on people’s support, generosity and kindness.

Along the way friends, friends-of-friends, family and in some cases complete strangers welcomed me into their homes, fed and entertained me so I could carry on my journey. Many people I spoke to along the way either had or lived with mental health issues and I was told many times what I was doing felt personal for them and they were really grateful. I was also told many times that I was an inspiration and made people feel more positive about themselves.

The journey was hard, it was supposed to be but it was made possible by support from others. I knew I couldn’t let anyone down, they believed in me and that made me believe in myself, it gave me strength, determination and confidence. It was a humbling experience, I needed help from people to succeed; I had to ask for help and I found that hard but knew if I didn’t that I would fail. The response I got back was at times overwhelming; it definitely felt like I got a whole lot more back than I gave.

I will always double-check myself now if I am asked for help to make sure I am giving all I can because people did that for me! It’s hard to describe how good it feels to know you have touched the hearts of people, all I can say is it makes me smile - a lot.’

Am I altruistic?

Altruism depends on genetics, hormones, childhood influences, personality, gender, society and culture.

We inherit some altruistic personality traits from our parents; identical twins share more altruistic tendencies than non-identical twins^{20,21}. Brain chemistry also affects altruism; hormones such as vasopressin can influence ruthlessness and generosity²², and oxytocin can influence parochial altruism, helping us bond with people inside our circle, though also increasing aggression towards outsiders²³.

The environment also has an influence. Positive role models foster prosocial behaviour in children, which can be encouraged by verbally reinforcing acts of kindness, but also disciplining children when they have harmed others whilst explaining the rationale for such discipline²⁴. However, rewarding children for prosocial behaviour may encourage them to act in this way only to gain incentives.

Wider society and culture influence us too. Many cultures view altruism as desirable and many world religions promote it, including Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Jainism, Judaism and Sikhism. Cultures where large families are common emphasise the importance of children contributing to family welfare; children from Kenya, Mexico and the Philippines²⁵ and adults in Thailand²⁶ were described as being more prosocial than their US counterparts. Similarly, English adolescents are more focused on individual goals than Chinese adolescents, and in turn less likely to engage in prosocial behaviour.²⁷ Western society is more focused on competition and individual achievement.

Social exclusion makes people less altruistic, it reduces empathy and trust in others²⁸ and lessens access to meaningful relationships. This may explain why extraverts²⁹ and people with a sense of individual social responsibility³⁰ tend to behave more altruistically. The UK riots of 2011 remind us of how social exclusion influences antisocial behaviour; the press discussed rioters' isolation from a society that they felt they had little stake in, something that has long been recognised^{31,32}.

Altruism and self-interest can be thought of as opposite ends of a spectrum³⁴. There will be a small number of extremely selfish people, a small number of extremely selfless people, with the majority fitting somewhere in between.

At one extreme, people who behave selfishly, experience low levels of guilt and empathy and who take advantage of others may fit the criteria for *antisocial personality disorder* (ASPD). Behaviours associated with ASPD include repeated lying, impulsivity, aggression and manipulation. *Psychopathy*, which is thought to occur in 1% of the population, is associated with ASPD. The cause of ASPD is complex and includes genetic factors and early environmental conditions³⁵.

At the other extreme, over-empathising and helping can be obstructive, ineffective and even destructive. Behaviours associated with so-called *pathological altruism* include denying one's own needs, focusing on others to the detriment of those needs, and finding it difficult to say 'no' to others. The causes of pathological altruism may be based in childhood, e.g. a child placed in a caring role may become hypersensitive to empathy³⁶.

The extremes of prosocial or antisocial behaviour can damage mental health. People with traits associated with psychopathy and ASPD often become socially excluded, fail to form meaningful relationships, have increased chances of developing anxiety disorders³⁷, depression³⁸ or of taking their own life³⁹. Their behaviours can also be damaging to the mental health and wellbeing of people around them. The mental health consequences of being overly altruistic may include workplace burnout⁴⁰, feelings of guilt or depression, and even anorexia³⁶.

When the price of giving is low, men appear more generous, and when the price is high, women are more generous³³.

'I am altruistic only to fit in and look like everyone else. If all I did was take, then I would stand out'

Antisocial Personality Disorder user forum

'I appear to have the disease to please, usually at my own expense. I appear to have become a victim of my 'good' intentions'

Yahoo Answers User

Altruism for health and wellbeing

Negative emotional states can affect our immune system, contributing to stress-related illnesses^{41,42}. Positive emotional states have the opposite effect.

Functional MRI scans show that altruistic behaviours activate the brain's mesolimbic reward system, an area that is activated when we are rewarded⁴². The implication here is that prosocial behaviour may give us a euphoric physical sensation, or a 'helper's high'⁴⁴ and can improve emotional wellbeing and reduce stress in the long term⁴⁵. In our own poll of 2,037 people, 80% agreed that being kind has a positive influence on their own health, with 3% disagreeing. An even higher percentage (87%) said that they felt good after being kind; 1% disagreed¹.

People who act generously, even in small ways, benefit from adopting a positive self-identity as a 'good' person⁴⁷. Prosocial behaviour improves morale, self-esteem, happiness and wellbeing^{48,49}, and reduces depressive symptoms⁵⁰.

Reasons for this include increased social support, increased encouragement to lead physically active lifestyles, distraction from one's own problems, engagement in meaningful activity, and improvements in self-belief and competence⁵¹.

Volunteering can also benefit our health. This may refer to formal volunteering roles, such as an internship at a company in order to gain experience to help with job prospects. It could also be less formal, for example, helping a friend carry their shopping back from the supermarket. From our survey, 33% of people said that they had volunteered their time or resources to someone else within the last week, although it was more common in people who worked part-time or who were retired, compared with full-time workers¹.

In *peer support volunteering*, the volunteer shares similar life experiences to the person he or she is helping. Peers may be able to offer advice for coping strategies that professionals may not offer or know about, and the person providing support can empathise with the person in distress⁵². For people with multiple sclerosis, those who provided peer support showed improved confidence, self-awareness, self-esteem, and reduced symptoms of depression⁵³.

Social networks in later life can diminish due to immobility or loss of friends and loved ones. The benefits of volunteering here are well documented; it can improve mental health⁵⁴, wellbeing and longevity^{55,56}. Socially isolated older adults gain most from volunteering⁵⁷. The Brighter Futures project conducted by the Mental Health Foundation involved piloting peer mentoring services for isolated older people in the community; older people acted as mentors to help isolated peers reconnect with communities. This improved mentors' mood, confidence and helped give them a sense of purpose⁵⁸. Our recent survey showed greater proportions of people over the age of 55 had volunteered their time or services in the past week (41%) compared to people aged 25-34 (25%)¹.

There are fewer studies focusing on the benefits of volunteering for young and middle aged people. According to one poll, 68% of young people had volunteered in the past year and 46% of young people mentioned helping others as a reason for volunteering⁵⁹. Young people involved in volunteering tend to have higher future aspirations, self-esteem and motivation toward school work than non-volunteers⁶⁰. One study showed that participating in a Time Bank scheme was beneficial to health; 66% of the study sample was below the age of 65⁶¹.

Helping or volunteering too much can make us feel stressed and overwhelmed by others' demands, outweighing any associated benefits^{62,65}. In extreme cases this can lead to compassion fatigue - a secondary form of traumatic stress⁶³. For this reason we should be careful before taking on too much.

Not everyone has time to volunteer or the resources to give financially, but we can all fit good deeds into daily life. The Metro newspaper provides a 'good deed feed' each day in which members of the public submit examples of others' acts of kindness. Through our national opinion survey we asked people (n=2,037) about the last time they carried out particular acts of kindness; 83% said that they held a door open for a stranger within the last week, 72% had let someone go ahead of them in a queue, but 28% of respondents could not remember the last time they gave up their seat for a stranger on public transport¹.

Even something as simple as listening to someone, forgiving them, or showing loyalty can make a difference. In one study, students were asked to carry out five random acts of kindness per week; examples included donating blood, helping a friend with a problem, or visiting sick relatives. Over six weeks these activities improved wellbeing in students who participated, in comparison to non-participating students⁶⁴.

Families who chose to donate the organs of a recently deceased family member reported psychological benefits from their decision.⁴²

Conclusion

Human beings are social animals, helping others underpins social interaction and cooperation. Helping other people makes us feel better, it can improve our own lives as well as improve our living environment.

There are biological, psychological and sociological reasons why people help each other, yet the real reasons behind our altruistic acts remain unknown. Sometimes we may help someone in order to help ourselves; sometimes we may do it just for the sake of it.

Opportunities to be helpful occur on a daily basis, they are easy to do and easy to avoid. We all see opportunities to hold a door open for someone, give up a seat or pick up a piece of litter. Other altruistic activities will only happen in times of crisis, such as clean-up initiatives or donations to disaster relief funds. Structured activities can offer great rewards, such as volunteering for a drop-in centre or working for a Time Bank, but they also require a level of investment which may not always be possible.

Helping other people may not seem a priority in the middle of a global recession, when we are stretched for time and resources and desperate to maintain control of our lives. But helping others is something we *can* control, and something that does not cost much in terms of time or money. We can all contribute something to make the world better. Being helpful and doing good deeds can improve the health and wellbeing of everyone, both as individuals and as a society.

We recommend that:

- Schools, nurseries and playgroups encourage acts of kindness, peer support and a culture of volunteering from childhood. These should be embedded into existing citizenship activities and mental health promotion programmes. Schools, universities and colleges should encourage children and young people to volunteer in local communities as part of curriculum activity.
- Employers promote mentally healthy workplaces through encouraging altruistic activities at work, they should also recognise the role of peer mentoring schemes and volunteering programmes with regards to workforce development.
- Voluntary sector organisations support people who are approaching retirement. This support should aim to redefine people's identities so that they can continue to see themselves as contributing members of the community.
- Commissioners of services aiming to support vulnerable groups should invest in volunteering and peer support services. This is relevant to socially isolated groups such as older people, people with mental health problems, people with learning disabilities, those with physical disabilities and long term illnesses.. Supporting people to contribute may result in reciprocal community support networks being developed.
- Government prioritise investment in third sector organisations designed to promote volunteering and Time Banks. These organisations need to be supported to create further opportunities for those most isolated to contribute. Training for voluntary sector staff should be provided to help people engage with potential volunteers who may require additional support.

Chinese proverb

If you want happiness for an hour, take a nap. If you want happiness for a day, go fishing.

If you want happiness for a year, inherit a fortune. If you want happiness for a lifetime, help somebody.

Useful organisations and information

Direct Gov

For general guidance about how to get involved in your community.
www.tinyurl.com/cannnhq

Do-it

Volunteering made easy. Quickly find ways to help in your community by searching their online database of volunteering opportunities in your area.
www.do-it.org.uk

We are what we do

A non-profit company creating ways for millions of people to do more small things to make a big difference.
www.wearewhatwedo.org

IVO

IVO is a website linking volunteers with charities and other organisations that could benefit from their time, skills and experience.
www.ivo.org

Kindness UK

Promoting, sharing and uniting kindness. Take part in the first ever nationwide kindness survey.
www.kindnessuk.com

Action for Happiness

Action for Happiness is a movement of people committed to building a happier society.
www.actionforhappiness.org

Samaritans

Volunteers are at the heart of Samaritans' 201 branches across the UK by delivering core services, running branches, fundraising and raising awareness of what they do.
www.samaritans.org/volunteer

Mental Health Foundation

The UK's leading mental health research, policy and service improvement charity. Visit our website for more tips on ways to be kind to others and how to look after your mental health.
www.mentalhealth.org.uk

VSO

Put your skills, energy and personal qualities to work helping people break out of poverty.
www.vso.org.uk/volunteer

Volunteering England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Volunteering England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are committed to supporting, enabling and celebrating volunteering in all its diversity. Their work links policy, research, innovation, good practice and programme management in the involvement of volunteers.

England
www.volunteering.org.uk
Scotland
www.volunteerscotland.org.uk
Wales
www.volunteering-wales.net
Northern Ireland
www.volunteernow.co.uk

Volunteer Development Scotland

Scotland's centre for Excellence in volunteering, VDS leads the way in informing and modernising approaches to improve the quality of the volunteering experience for the people of Scotland.
www.vds.org.uk

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