

*“The best way to find yourself, is to lose yourself in the service of others.”*

Ghandi



# Giving Time, Gaining Life

## Volunteering and Life's Rewards



**Girl Scouts.**

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The benefits of volunteering one's time goes well beyond the effect on the community. Research now shows that people who engage in volunteer work exhibit an increase in mental and physical well-being as well as an improvement in career prospects.

Volunteers in one study stated that they enhanced their organizational and managerial skills, their communication skills and their interpersonal skills as a result of their volunteer experiences—all skills greatly valued in the world of work.

This session takes a look at the research and the subsequent findings of three noted theorists: Abraham Maslow, Erik Erikson and Donald Super; supported by a personal story of a life-long volunteer.



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## *“Volunteering is causing good health.”*

John Wilson, Duke University

Various theories and research studies show that those who volunteer, while benefiting others, also benefit themselves. This session reviews the work of three theorists and briefly examines studies that validate their theories. A community volunteer shares her experiences and describes how they match – or don't match – the theories and research.

### **Theorist: Abraham Maslow**

Everyone is probably familiar with the theories of Abraham Maslow, the psychologist who developed the personality theory that states that human beings strive for their highest levels of achievement and capabilities. This highest level is labeled as having a “healthy personality” or being a “self-actualized person.”

How does this apply to Volunteering and Life's Rewards? Research has demonstrated that the role of a volunteer can help satisfy the needs in the three highest levels of the pyramid: the need for love, affection and belonging; the need for self-esteem; and, the need for self-actualization. According to John Wilson of Duke University, volunteering should have a positive effect on mental health. Volunteering is a form of social activity and it is well established that the quantity of social relationships a person has yields positive mental health effects. In his study, eight out of ten volunteers reported an increase in well-being.

### **Theorist: Erik Erikson**

The second theorist we want to look at today is Erik Erikson. As a psychologist, he theorized that the course of human development is determined by the interaction of the body, the mind and cultural influences. He organized life into eight stages that extend from birth to death. If we look primarily at the stages of development that Erickson defines as middle adulthood and late adulthood, his theory tells us that the significant task is to perpetuate culture and transmit values of the culture, and later, to give back or contribute to the betterment of society.

According to Li and Ferraro of Purdue University, in the act of helping others, volunteers serve a greater social good and volunteer work may lead to better mental well-being, less depression and higher life satisfaction. In their study, volunteers were shown to enhance social interaction and strengthen friendships. Volunteers were shown to be happier, report less stress, have higher self-esteem, fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression and a stronger will to live. Indeed, several studies show that volunteers may in fact enjoy better health and actually live longer lives.

### **Theorist: Donald Super**

Donald Super is an important theorist in the field of career development. He, too, created a list of developmental expectations for stages of life. These developmental stages take us through the development of self-concept and a concept of the world of work, to exploration and skill development, entering the world of work, progressing in a career and preparing for retirement.

Research on volunteering has validated Super's ideas that volunteering can improve a person's career prospects. Not surprisingly, volunteers in one study stated that they enhanced their organizational and managerial skills, their communication skills and their interpersonal skills as a result of their volunteer experiences – all skills greatly valued in the world of work.

### **Summary**

Can we promise happiness, lack of stress, health, successful careers, higher salaries or long life if you volunteer? Sadly, there are no promises here. However, there is a theoretical grounding to say it can be true and a growing body of research that indicates that it is, indeed, true for many. When you find something you care about and dedicate your time and energy to that organization or cause, I would not be surprised to learn that you had made new friends, had fun, learned or improved skills and just felt better because in your own way you made a difference and made the world a better place for someone, somewhere.

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