



# e-quilibrium

- "electronic briefs on behavior and health"

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## Altruism and Health

Charles Dickens' famous story, *A Christmas Carol*, describes the transformation of the gruff and insensitive Ebenezer Scrooge who rediscovers that being kind and generous is not only good for those he helps but results in a better quality of life for him as well. We are presently in the annual season of gift-giving and the time when contributions to charities are at their peak. It is widely assumed that kindness and generosity is good for the giver. Does science concur with this social, philosophical, and religious assumption?

This is not an easy topic for investigators to study for a number of reasons, including the challenges of defining and measuring kindness, generosity, and altruism. One common definition of altruism is "the intention to benefit others at a cost to oneself." How does one know the motivation of the helper/giver... is the behavior truly loving or altruistic, or is the behavior motivated by a sense of obligation or an ulterior motive? In many cases there are mixed motives.

One of the ways that altruism has been measured is to track the volunteer activity of individuals, recognizing that this is only one specific type of helping behavior. People who volunteer are typically found to be both happier and healthier. However, which comes first, the health or the helping behavior? It is well established that happy people tend to be more altruistic (Charles Dickens was accurate in depicting the unhappy Scrooge as selfish and miserly). Conversely, there is evidence from longitudinal studies that helping behavior is

associated with greater longevity. These studies also suggest that the health benefits of volunteering increase as we get older.

Stephen G. Post of Case Western Reserve University recently reviewed the research literature that has examined the relationship between altruism and health, both physical and mental. He concludes that “a generous life is a happier and healthier one,” provided that a person’s helping behavior is not overwhelming for them (i.e., becomes a source of unhealthy stress).

There are a number of reasons why altruism may have health benefits. Persons who are helping and/or giving frequently have deeper social involvements. A focus on helping others may serve as a distraction from one’s own problems and perhaps alter one’s perspective on life, both of which can be useful for coping with the stress in one’s life. Altruism may provide an enhanced sense of life purpose and meaning. Furthermore, the positive emotions that come from giving to others can help resolve the negative emotions which can damage health.

In sum, the available research evidence does support the notion that helping is good for our health, provided the process or experience isn’t overwhelming. As with much of life, the key is to find the proper balance or “equilibrium.” My seasonal wish for you is that your altruism be meaningful and healthy.

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