

The Altruism Option – A Key to Wellness and a Fuller Life

The More You Give, The More You Receive

Too few of us are in touch with a lifestyle choice that can bring us a wealth of happiness, integrity, and wellness. Altruism, or giving to others, has grown out of favor over the past several decades, but it has been a feature of human interaction throughout history. Indeed, a spirit of cooperation and giving has always been a hallmark of what binds a group or even a society together. Two people sharing their resources can produce more than two individuals acting alone in most circumstances.

Many people take the attitude that they work hard for what they have, so why should they give anything to another person or an organization? Over the past several decades our culture has seen a shift away from giving toward a focus on self-interest. This shift coincides with a weakening of our sense of community, the breakdown of the nuclear (and extended) family, higher divorce rates, increased emotional diagnoses for children, and increased stratification of the social and economic orders. Guided by self-interest and greed, rather than compassion and sharing, some in our society continue to grow wealthier while many others drift down into poverty. Over the past decades, people's ties to each other have weakened, and more people feel lonely. Violence has increased, as have human suffering and environmental destruction. More people these days feel disconnected from others and question whether their lives have meaning. They find security in acquiring material goods – the latest technological tool, the current handbag, the trendiest automobile. Adhering to self-interest has not left us individually, or as a society, in an emotionally healthy state.

The antidote to this cultural trend is found at the individual level. When enough people become conscious of how self-interest pervades their lives and then challenge it by adopting a different way of living, it spreads throughout society. Recent research into neurological activity in the brain indicates that we are “hard-wired” toward altruism – toward giving to others, compassion, caring, kindness, and sharing. This is the natural human condition. Exploring this part of yourself can bring you back into harmony with the your natural state.

“Be the change you want to see in the world.”

– *Gandhi*

Of course, self-interest and altruism are not either/or concepts. We need both. Just as the person guided purely by self-interest loses a great deal in terms of life experiences, the completely altruistic person – constantly serving others – is deprived of the experience of exploring aspects of his or her own self-care. The clue is to find a balance between these two extremes. At this cultural juncture, most people would benefit from looking into the altruistic option.

The Advantages of Giving

It has often been said that it is better to give than to receive. Let's explore this in more detail. How do you benefit from giving to others?

There is a cardinal rule to remember about giving – when you give expecting a reciprocal reward, you won't get one. When you give money or time expecting a return on your investment, you defeat the goal of giving. However, you benefit greatly when your giving is motivated by joy, love, and selflessness. Getting in touch with your giving self is, in itself, the reward.

New Relationships –

Humans crave interaction with other people. We are social beings. However, we may feel isolated in our routine daily lives – going to work, coming home, never talking in a meaningful way to anyone else. If we lack stimulating interaction with others, our lives shrink. One way of breaking out of this isolation is to cultivate new friendships with others who are involved in taking care of the world – and themselves in the process. Join a group that feeds the homeless. Organize a neighborhood drive to donate to an unemployed family. Visit a few residents of a local nursing facility. You'll soon expand your social world and involve yourself in a host of new, meaningful interactions.

Reducing Our Insecurities –

These are fearful times. Most of our information about the world comes from television, and their ratings (and profits) increase when they focus on crime, war, terrorist attacks, political strife, and economic crisis. In reality, these times are probably no more violent than past times in history have been – but we are now, through the media, exposed to violence now more than ever. Thus, our fear and insecurity about the world increases and our response is to hunker down into a cocooned lifestyle. Confronting this fear by increasing our social connections through giving to others is a good way to achieve a more balanced life. Reaching out to neighbors and joining community organizations is an effective method of reducing our fears of the world.

Improving Our Health –

Volunteer work has been shown through various research studies to –

- enhance our immune systems,
- lower cholesterol levels,
- strengthen cardiovascular functioning, and
- reduce stress.

Achieving Our Full Potential –

When you work purely for self-interest you lose touch with your fuller potential – that is, your ability to share your energy, work, and talents for the good of others. You challenge yourself, and because your work has an impact on others, and they may even come to depend on what you give them, you push yourself even farther. In the process, you may discover skills and abilities you never knew you had. You may experience a leap in your self-esteem. You may even start to see the world in a different way. Instead of the negative thinking that can emerge out of living through the same routine everyday, you may begin to see the world – yourself and others – in a more positive and exciting light. Doing good can bring good things not only to the lives of other people, but to your own life as well.

Addressing Our Own Moods –

We all have negative cycles in our lives – and sometimes we end up stuck in a negative cycle for an extended period. Giving to others is one way some people use to address their own moods. When you feel unhappy, try bringing happiness into someone else's life – and you'll likely find that your own unhappiness dissipates, at least to some degree. If you feel anxious, try soothing someone else. If you feel depressed, try giving someone else some nurture, care, and kind attention. We are all interconnected. By giving to others, we give to ourselves at the same time. We reap what we sow.

“A rich life consists fundamentally of serving others, trying to leave the world a little better than you found it.”

– *Cornel West*

Some Ways of Giving

You might think that, despite the obvious benefits of giving, you simply do not have the time, resources, or energy to help other people. However, value is not necessarily limited to money. Acquiring an altruistic way of living means finding value in areas of our lives that may have nothing to do with monetary assets. Cleaning out your closet and giving old clothes to the Salvation Army, expecting a tax deduction, is not necessarily a good example of an altruistic lifestyle. There are many ways of sharing what you have with other people – and you don't have to spend money.

Laughter –

Researchers have long known that laughter causes the brain to release powerful chemicals called endorphins. These neurochemicals bring us a feeling of joy, ease pain, and increase alertness. Laughter relaxes us. It can help to defuse tense situations. Explore what makes you laugh – and then share it with other people. Tell jokes and funny stories, share witticisms, and engage in physical humor.

Knowledge –

You have learned a great deal in your lifetime, both from practical experience and what you have read and heard. Share your knowledge with other people. You become more valuable to your social networks and to people you meet. You have acquired wisdom and have learned what to do and what to avoid. Help other people as they struggle with situations similar to what you have experienced. Some people acquire a library and leave books on shelves for years, never to be opened again. But think about this. Might it not be better to have a conversation with someone about a book and if they express an interest in the book, then simply give it to them? You benefit from sharing your knowledge and giving a gift, and the other person benefits not only from the knowledge they will acquire from the book, but from the experience of having something of value given to them.

Time –

Time can be seen as your most precious asset. You have only a limited amount of it during your lifetime, so it is important to spend it wisely. Ask yourself if you are spending your time well. Mindless hours in front of the TV might be better spent in a pursuit important to you, one that enhances your life and the lives of others. When you give your time to another person or an organization, you are giving a precious gift – a part of your life. Examine your own values – do you like being with people, nature, activity, ideas? Then give your time to pursuing whatever is it that you value – and do it in such a way that other people reap the benefit of what you value. For example, if you like being in nature, volunteer your time in building nature trails. If it's activity, you might coach a soccer team or teach inner-city kids how to swim through a local youth program.

Attention –

Showing respect to others is one of the best gifts. You can do this by active listening. One of our greatest needs is to have another person show that he or she cares about us. It makes us feel nurtured and important – and so few of us have even one person in the world who can do this for us. Encourage a friend to talk to you about important issues. Give this person your complete attention. Don't pass judgment as the person talks. Ask short questions or make brief comments that encourage the person to say more (like "Tell me more," or "That must have really been hard"). Avoid giving advice unless the other person asks for it. Just listening is one of the greatest gifts you can give someone else.

Book Recommendation

Azim Jamal and Harvey McKinnon. **The Power of Giving – How Giving Back Enriches Us All.** New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2008, 188 pages, \$22.95. ISBN: 978-1-58542-668-3.

Toward a Simpler Life

Many of us are caught in the materialistic trap. We work to make more money so we can buy more things, and the more things we want, the more we have to work. Our lives become limited to self-interest and we lose touch with the broader and richer life that comes from connection to the community and sharing what we have with others. In our hum-drum, work-a-day lives, we find little relief. We might go to an expensive restaurant for a treat or we may spend seven days once a year at a lavish and barely affordable resort. And we define this as the good life.

Examine your values. Make a list of your life priorities and examine which of the priorities you are achieving right now. The items on your list might include “more reading,” “learning about music,” “spending more time with good friends,” “examining my spiritual life,” or “spending time outdoors in nature.” You may be passionate about some items on your list, but find that you don’t have the time now because you have to work so much just to make ends meet.

Can you work less in order to make more time for yourself? Can you cut back on your responsibilities? Maybe you can. **The clue is not how much money you make, but how much money you spend.**

Examine how you can live a simpler life – where the quality of everyday living can be much higher. If you like music, why spend a hundred dollars on a top-name concert when you can go to a free community concert, meet people, and have a great time? If you like great food, why not cook it yourself at home and invite some good friends over to share it with you? In fact, why not grow the vegetables yourself in a backyard or community garden? (There’s nothing better.) If you want to go to a beautiful place, why spend thousands on a packaged resort vacation when you can go to your own backyard or a nearby park and watch the butterflies and listen to the birds sing? If you need transportation, why buy a new gas guzzler? You might be able to bike to your destination and enjoy the sights and sounds of different streets.

“The unexamined life is not worth living.”

– *Socrates*