

It's better to give than to receive...

A Christmas message

It's better to give than to receive

It is good to be good to others. Of course virtue has its own reward, but doing something good for someone else can have benefits that are both psychological and physical. There is even scientific evidence to back this up.

Being altruistic is associated with a longer life expectancy. Several longitudinal studies of older adults have found that volunteering results in significant reductions in mortality. In addition, socially connected people generally outlive those who lead more isolated lives.

Philanthropy works too. Making a monetary donation activates an area in the brain that is responsible for dopamine-mediated euphoria – secret Santa anyone?

Helping others is often a necessary step in helping yourself. Researchers have found that recovering alcoholics, who help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety, are significantly less likely to relapse in the year following treatment.

In another study, women with breast cancer were assigned to a support group, to test whether this improved mood and rates of depression. Participation in the group included both giving and

receiving support. At the end of the study, depression and mood were improved, but what surprised researchers was that the women in the support group survived twice as long as the women without support (18 months compared with nine months).

People employed in helping professions, such as healthcare professionals, have a head start in reaping the rewards of giving.

It's the thought that counts

The power of positive thinking

If all this do-gooding sounds like it takes too much effort, there is still hope. Just thinking about giving may be enough to reap the benefits. The “Mother Teresa” study demonstrated that physiological changes occur in response to virtuous thoughts. After viewing a film about Mother Teresa's work, a group of students displayed increases in immunoglobulin A, a protective antibody. These increases were significantly higher than those who watched a neutral film. Levels remained high for an hour after the film, and the researchers concluded that dwelling on positive thoughts strengthened the immune system.

But don't think bad thoughts

A cautionary tale for the Ebenezer Scrooge's among us – people who dwell on negative thoughts, or only think of themselves, are more likely to develop illness at an earlier age.

“The value of a person resides in what they give and not in what they are capable of receiving”. – Albert Einstein

In a study of people with Type A personalities, high numbers of self-references in speech significantly correlated with heart disease, after controlling for age, blood pressure and cholesterol.

Hostility and negative emotional states among married couples are associated with longer times for wound healing. In one study, wounds took a day longer to heal after an argument than after a supportive discussion, and two days longer in those demonstrating high levels of hostility.

Bad bedside manner catches up with you in the long run. In a historical study of doctors at Duke University, hostility scores based on hostile emotions, attitudes and actions were calculated at age 25 years. At age 50 years, those who previously scored highly on the hostility scale, were four to five times more likely than those with lower scores, to develop coronary disease and seven times more likely to die of any disease.

Eat, drink and be merry

But all things in moderation

It is good to be good to others...but not too good. Excessive focus on others can have negative health consequences. “Empathic over-arousal” or “compassion fatigue” is often seen among people constantly exposed to situations requiring empathy and generous actions i.e. healthcare workers. It is essential that caring about others is balanced with caring for yourself. More volunteering does not necessarily translate into greater benefits.

The right dose, method and context of giving will vary from person to person. In life there are givers and there are receivers.

All good things come to an end

So the good news is that it's good to be good and thinking about being good might be good enough. However it's bad to be bad, but it's also bad to be too good.

Let's apply the “giving and receiving” theme to some of the articles in this edition:

Infectious gastroenteritis

It's better to give food than to receive it. Beware of the Christmas buffet, know where your food has been and how it has been prepared. Like your mother always told you, the safest option is the dish you brought yourself.

Discussing weight loss

It's better to give advice to your patients, rather than to fear receiving criticism because you are not perfect either. It's about the patient and how you can help them. In the process you may discover that you have climbed some of that hill to success yourself.

HIV and risky behaviours

It's better to give...now here it gets tricky on how to stay polite. Read the article and make your conclusions about risky behaviours and how to counsel your patients.

So here we give you our final edition of BPJ for 2009. While we don't expect to receive anything in return, we hope that you enjoy BPJ enough to join us on our journey next year... oh and receiving the occasional gratitude can't be too bad!

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year from the team at bpac.

Bibliography

Post S. It's good to be good: Science says it's so. Health Prog 2009;90(4):18-25.