Volunteering is great for your health

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Volunteers prepare Thanksgiving meals for the needy at Covenant House New York in NYC.
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Volunteering for as little as two to 2.5 hours each week can be beneficial for your health, a new study suggests.

Unitedhealthcare and VolunteerMatch studied 2,705 volunteers age 18 and older and found that 75 percent of those who volunteered in the past year said it made them feel "physically healthier," according to the report. And more than one-third (34 percent) of those who volunteered found participating helped them to better manage their chronic illnesses, compared to those who have not volunteered in the past 12 months.

While there is no physical evidence (such as fewer trips to healthcare providers) to support the claims in the study (which is backed by a volunteer organization), do-gooders self-reported having an overall better quality of life, including a higher capacity to enjoy socializing and developing deeper friendships. The study

also noted that volunteers can develop better professional skills and often practiced time management and teamwork better than they did before.

The same study found other mental and emotional benefits to spending your free time helping others: 93 percent of people reported an improved mood; 79 percent reported lower stress levels and 88 percent reported increased self-esteem by giving back.

Volunteers serve up dessert at a homeless shelter in Denver, Colorado.
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Researchers also looked at the role employers can play in encouraging volunteer work. Almost three-fourths of employees who take on volunteer jobs through work reported feeling better about their full-time job and 91 percent believe it's important for an employer to allow workers to volunteer on paid time.

And science shows that it pays off. Volunteering forces employees to focus their attention on something outside of their day-to-day, 9-to-5 grind, giving workers a change in perspective that can often help generate new ideas and problem-solving skills in the workplace, a study from staffing firm Robert Half International found.

And there's more evidence to suggest that helping those in need is a smart move. A separate study involving more than 64,000 people age 60 and up from 1998 to 2010 found that volunteering can enhance cognition. Individuals who volunteered 100 hours a year scored about 6 percent higher in cognitive testing, on average than non-volunteers.

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