

GOODWILL

Good, and good for you

The built-in bonus that comes with helping others

WHEN WE DO GOOD, it doesn't only benefit other people. It helps us, too. Studies show that helping others boosts oxytocin, serotonin, and dopamine, neurotransmitters that make us feel satisfied. And as we face the challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic, which have left many of us feeling anxious about our health, our families, our jobs, and our futures, another benefit to that feeling of being rewarded when we do good — lower stress levels — might be just what the doctor ordered.

"There has been a lot of research that when we are helping others, or when we are doing something for someone else, our reward centers light up in the brain and our stress levels go down," says psychologist Mary Berge, a member of the Rotary Club of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, who has led discussions with many Rotary clubs about coping during the pandemic.

In a 2016 study, researchers asked participants about scenarios in which they either gave or received support. According to the study, published in *Psychosomatic Medicine: Journal of Biobehavioral Medicine*, MRI tests showed that only the instances of giving correlated to reduced stress and enhanced activity in the brain's reward centers — which suggests that giving support ultimately brought greater mental benefits than receiving it.

Researchers at Oslo Metropolitan University in Norway and the Technical University of Dortmund in Germany found that people who are or

have been volunteers report greater well-being than people who have not.

And in a 2013 Canadian study in *JAMA Pediatrics*, researchers looked at adolescents who do volunteer work to see the effect it had on their cardiovascular health. The study found that volunteers reduced their body mass index and lowered other cardiovascular risk factors.

Rotary member Jenny Stotts, a social worker, child advocate, and trauma specialist, has studied how we can increase our resiliency, adapt to adversity during the pandemic, and emerge stronger. "When we engage in planned acts of kindness, we experience the benefits of serotonin and dopamine, which are two neurotransmitters that contribute to our feelings of pleasure or joy," says Stotts, a member of the Rotary Club of Athens Sunrise, Ohio.

Especially when we do acts of good repeatedly, Stotts says, something interesting happens in our brains: "If we engage in a regular daily practice of kindness and gratitude, we are essentially carving out pathways within our brain that make us healthier and a little more emotionally stable."

She also notes that Rotary members can play a significant role in changing how people think. "When we, as leaders in our community, adopt a way of thinking — that level of intentional gratitude and intentional kindness — we have a way of setting a really good example," she says. "I think it is a calming and stabilizing force. We can set that tone for our entire club and for our communities."

Many Rotary, Rotaract, and Interact clubs are doing just that and finding creative ways to be kind to their neighbors.

The Rotary clubs of Almere and Almere Weerwater, The Netherlands, purchased 2,559 bouquets totaling more than 50,000 tulips to give to health care workers at 77 locations in Almere.

The Rotary Club of Downtown Los Angeles, California, built and stocked a dozen public bookcases around the city so children and adults would have better access to books. People use them to both take and give books. The libraries reach areas without many sources of books, especially when public libraries are closed.

The Rotary Club of Bensheim-Heppenheim, Germany, organized concerts for residents and caregivers in senior living homes. Musicians, including club members Bruno Weis and Berthold Mäurer, performed from areas outside the facilities while residents listened from their balconies or nearby park benches.

The Interact Club of Kayhi, Alaska, held a virtual high school prom for more than 500 students with help from a radio station managed by a Rotary member. The club paid for a band, and there were dance and trivia contests with prizes from local businesses.

The Rotary Club of Molina de Segura, Spain, which holds an annual art contest for young people, extended the age range to allow entries from children and young people ages three to 18 and invited students throughout the country to submit artwork that expressed why it is important to stay home during the pandemic. The club's objective was to give students something creative to do while social distancing and to allow them to convey how they were feeling about the pandemic.

— ARNOLD R. GRAHL



Many studies have established a connection between **volunteering** and improved **health**. In the brain, **acts of kindness** release powerful chemicals like oxytocin, serotonin, and dopamine, **elevating our mood**, increasing reward stimuli, and reducing stress. **Compassion lowers heart rates** and reduces the risk of coronary distress.

