



Cool

to be kind

In this edited extract from The Good Giving Guide, authors **Lyn Amy** and **Mary Pearce** reveal why altruism is so rewarding.

Why giving is good for you

Many of us have been brought up on the maxim that giving is good for the soul, but according to recent studies, giving also has proven benefits for physical and mental health.

Research quoted by Stephen Post in *Why Good Things Happen To Good People* (Broadway) shows that when we start giving, our life satisfaction and physical health are significantly improved, death is delayed and depression is reduced.

Furthermore, research reported in the *National Academy of Sciences* showed that giving money away actually triggered the brain's pleasure centre. Researchers at a major hospital in the US used magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to map electrical activity in the brains of volunteers who had all been given cash and had to choose whether to keep this money themselves or give it to charity. Researchers found that the part of the brain that was active during this experiment was the mesolimbic pathway, the "reward centre" of the brain that provides the euphoria associated with sex, good food and what the Germans call "gemutlichkeit".

It seems that even more of the chemical dopamine is released when someone gives than when they receive.

Indeed, most people are pleased to be asked to assist, and when they do, are happy to have helped. This feelgood factor appears to motivate many people involved in the not-for-profit sector – volunteers, donors and philanthropists – who have frequently told us how much they received from their involvement, often claiming that they get more from their efforts to help others than they actually give.



Of course, giving is not just about handing over money. In fact, some would argue that hard cash is far from the most important thing that we can give one another and our planet. Compassion, loyalty, generosity of spirit, listening to others and standing up for one's beliefs – all these qualities are crucial to a successful civilised society. People who demonstrate these qualities as young people are shown to live healthier lives, with less propensity for depression. Older people who give in these ways are shown to live longer. There appears to be an astonishing connection between generosity and health.

How people learn to give

A great number of the people we interviewed say they were profoundly influenced by the way their own friends and family demonstrated their social awareness, and how openly equality and other social justice issues were discussed. Often, the pattern of giving was established well back in previous generations. Nearly everyone we spoke to mentioned that they learnt the value of giving and sharing from their parents.

It would seem that by demonstrating generosity themselves, parents may well be helping their children to develop into happy, giving and sharing adults. This view is reinforced by youth and family clinical psychologist Barbara Waterman, who believes that giving can be taught from a very early age. Further, she believes that there is an art to giving and this art is to give unconditionally. As a demonstration of this point she describes a lovely old Cherokee Indian tradition where children are taught to give away their favourite possession and know to give this with no expectation of receiving anything in return.

The idea of giving unconditionally has been explored by many philosophers and thinkers. Almost a thousand years ago, the Jewish scholar Moses Maimonides developed the Ladder of Giving, with each rung representing a higher degree of virtue. The eight rungs are listed, from bottom to top (see box, left).

Most people like to be thought of as generous, and genuine acts of kindness are always viewed positively by everyone involved – the giver, the receiver and the onlooker. Next time you give, think about where your giving falls on the ladder.

So how do you get started?

Now that we understand the need for giving, and how it enhances our lives, let us look at how we can begin to make decisions about where to channel our resources, time and energy.



While it might seem easier to simply respond to a fundraising request when approached, it is not always the best strategy. Taking the time to plan where and how we want to direct our giving not only ensures that we contribute to causes that we really care about,

Some questions to think about include the following:

What personal attributes do you have (such as leadership skills) that might be expressed through your giving?

What issues are important to you?

Could you strengthen family bonds or other friendships through a shared understanding and/or commitment to a particular cause?

It could be, for example, that you:

Are very organised, and would be comfortable donating your administrative skills to a particular cause.

Wish to develop a sense of community, especially among young people.

Have a close friend or family member interested in a similar cause with whom you'd like to share the experience of giving.

The ladder of giving

From the bottom, each rung represents a higher degree of virtue...

Giving grudgingly and making the recipient feel disgraced or embarrassed.

Giving cheerfully, but giving too little.

Giving cheerfully and adequately, but only after being asked.

Giving before being asked.

Giving when you do not know who will benefit, but the recipient knows your identity.

Giving when you know who will benefit, but the recipient does not know your identity.

Giving when neither the donor nor the recipient is aware of the other's identity.

Giving whatever it takes to enable an individual to be self-reliant.





but also helps alleviate the helplessness or inadequacy that many of us feel in the face of social need – the fear that, in the end, we have no power to make a difference.

Initially, it is helpful to think about your natural strengths, what you believe you can do and, importantly, what you enjoy doing.

Choosing a cause

The following broad categories might help you narrow down your choices:

- Human rights
- Refugees and asylum seekers
- Gays and lesbians
- Particular ethnic groups
- Housing and homelessness
- Health and social welfare
- Chronically ill (diabetes, asthma, arthritis, cancer, multiple sclerosis...)
- Indigenous Australians
- Drug-addicted people
- Offenders and ex-offenders
- Victims of crime
- The aged
- Natural disaster aid (droughts, floods)
- Disabled people (blind, deaf, paraplegic)
- Animal welfare
- Environmental protection
- Greenhouse gas reduction
- Recycling
- Tree planting
- Preserving coastlines and waterways
- Desalination

Once you have thought about the kind of person you are, and how this might affect how you give, the next step is to choose a cause or causes that you feel passionate about. With more than 35,000 registered charities in Australia, this can seem a daunting task.

By taking the time to really think about what motivates us and what we really care about, and selecting a cause that matches our interests and beliefs, we can start to take control of where we put our time and money.

This is a deeply empowering process. None of us, no matter how much time or money we may have, can help everyone. But if we focus our energy on those causes where we feel we can make a contribution, it will add up to a real difference, especially when combined with the efforts of others in our community.

“By taking the time to think about what motivates us and take control of our time and money.”

Sarah's story

Sarah had a strong community conscience and was accustomed to making donations to various causes. However, she had become increasingly disenchanted with the “scattergun” approach, and wanted to plan her giving.

“I started thinking about what was important to me, and knew it would have to have something to do with animals. My parents were both wildlife conservationists, and had set aside their property for Land for Wildlife. I remember them going out to a special anniversary dinner when I was a child. On the way to the restaurant, they came across a dead wallaby that had been hit by a car. There was a little baby in its pouch that was still alive, so my mum and dad rescued it and came straight home to look after it – they didn't even think twice about missing their special dinner!

“I suppose their respect for all forms of life must have seeped into my being. I've stayed living in the same community that I



grew up in, I love the bush and the proximity to the city – it's the best of both worlds. But it will only stay that way if we make sure that bushland reserves are maintained and local flora and fauna are protected.

“There is always a developer who wants to increase housing or carry out some kind of commercial development. I was never very involved in community work as a young person because I was so focused on my accounting career. I worked so hard that I really didn't make the time to even start a family. But once I got to my early 40s, I realised that I wanted to make more of a contribution. (I suppose it sounds like a typical midlife crisis!)

“Anyway, because of my lifelong interest it was an easy decision for me to focus my efforts on preserving and protecting wildlife. I researched the wildlife conservation groups that were operating in my area, and finally decided on one of these groups. Then I came up with the idea to develop a wildlife program with the local primary school. I guess I wanted to encourage kids to develop love and respect for living things in the same way that my parents had done for me.

“Now I'm involved in developing that program with the wildlife group and the school and the local vet clinic. I also sit on my charity's finance committee – it's good to be able to put my business skills to good use.”