

The Secret to Living a Longer, Healthier Life

An unexpected way to combat Alzheimer's, hypertension and depression

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www.nextavenue.org

May 11, 2016

After attending the Milken Institute Center for the Future of Aging's Purposeful Aging Summit last week, I came away with this: There's a growing body of scientific research proving that aging with purpose is really, really good for your health.

The relatively small AARP Experience Corps (where 2,200 people over age 50 tutor inner-city kids) and the three federal Senior Corps programs (a total of 270,000 volunteers 55 and older in Foster Grandparents, RSVP and Senior Companions) have doubled as labs demonstrating the beneficial effects — ranging from lower mortality and depression rates to reducing the risk of Alzheimer's.

It's the "relatively small" part that led Purposeful Aging Summit participant John Gomperts, president and CEO of America's Promise Alliance and former director of AmeriCorps, to refer to such programs as "curiously and frustratingly subscale." He asked the group: "If we have such powerful evidence of the benefit of successful programs, why has this not taken off in the way one would expect?"

Good question, and one that the 34 attendees wrestled with for the better part of the day.

The Health Benefits of Purposeful Aging

"The conversation we're having is not just a group of do-gooders trying to save the world," said the Summit's leader, Paul Irving, chairman of the Milken Institute Center for the Future of Aging. "Evidence-based research demonstrates that purposeful aging improves the lives of older adults and the beneficiaries of their service."

A few examples of the evidence, much of which was conducted by researchers including Summit participants Dr. Linda Fried (dean of the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University), Patricia Boyle (a neurologist with the Rush Alzheimer's Disease Center at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago) and Becca Levy (a professor at the Yale School of Public Health):

- Older adults with a positive self-perception of aging lived 7.5 years longer than those who were less positive (Yale and Miami University)
- Senior citizens who rated highly on a purpose of life scale had a 30 percent lower rate of cognitive decline than those with low scores (Rush University Medical Center)
- Residents of retirement communities and senior housing facilities with greater purpose in life had a reduced risk of Alzheimer's disease (Rush University Medical Center)
- Senior housing residents without dementia but with a greater purpose in life had a lower risk of developing impairment in basic activities of daily living and mobility (Rush University Medical Center)

- Experience Corps volunteers improved significantly in physical activity and mental health compared to other similar adults, a likely reason those with arthritis reported less pain and those with diabetes needed fewer diabetes medications (Johns Hopkins/Columbia/UCLA)
- In a 2013 UnitedHealth Group survey of people who'd volunteered in the previous 12 months, 94 percent said volunteering improved their mood; 78 percent said it lowered their stress levels and 76 percent said it made them feel healthier

And, quoting Barbara Bradley Hagerty from her excellent, well-researched new book, *Life Reimagined: The Science, Art and Opportunity of Midlife*, volunteering “makes you happier and spares you depression. And heart attacks. It helps keep you sober and boosts your immune system. It cures burnout.”

In short, Hagerty said, volunteering gives you purpose in life. “If you could put this stuff in a bottle and sell it at Rite Aid, you’d be a billionaire,” she quotes Dr. Stephen Post, director of the Center for Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care and Bioethics at Stony Brook University, as saying.

“There is a huge potential for programs like Experience Corps, if they are well designed and implemented, to delay the loss of cognitive function in older age,” said Fried. Experience Corps Vice President Lester Strong echoed her view, saying: “The power of this engagement is enormous.”

Volunteering Pays Dividends

Volunteering in the second half of life is also something that can pay dividends for everyone. Marc Freedman, the CEO of Encore.org who co-founded Experience Corps with Fried, told Summit attendees: “Experience Corps volunteers are the salt of the earth. They’re mostly working and middle class. We’re not just talking about an elite phenomenon.”

You don’t “need to have a new career to lead a purposeful life,” noted Summit attendee Ken Dychtwald — founder and CEO of the AgeWave research firm.

But to receive the potential health benefits, it helps to volunteer for the right reason and for the right amount of time.

A 2011 study from the University of Michigan, Stony Brook and the University of Rochester found that volunteering only lowers your mortality risk if you do it primarily to help others. There was no mortality benefit for people who volunteered for “self-oriented” reasons.

And although no one knows for sure how much volunteering you need to do to get healthier, Carnegie Mellon found that 200 hours a year correlated to lower blood pressure; other studies found a 100-hours-a-year threshold (or two hours a week) for positive health outcomes.

If Older Americans Volunteered More

Most people over 55, however, are falling short. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, people 55 to 64 who volunteer do it for 56 hours a year —that’s the median — which is a hair over the 52 hours for volunteers overall. People 65 and older who volunteer get closer to that minimum threshold: they give their time to others 94 hours a year (median). Only about one in four Americans

who are 55 or older actually do volunteer, however, and that percentage has been sliding since 2011.

Many seem eager to start adding purpose to their lives. Encore.org, which has given out The Purpose Prize for the past 10 years, conducted a survey which discovered that there are 4.5 million Americans in encore careers to help others but another 21 million who say they want to be in them.

The need is great, the Summit panelists agreed, to get the word out about programs like Experience Corps and Senior Corps. Said AARP's Senior Vice President for Market Innovation Jody Holtzman: "We need to do a better job celebrating the victories. I think the tipping point is here, but it won't tip unless the outer world knows about these victories."

Also, the Summiteers said, the government and nonprofits need to expand and grow more opportunities for purposeful aging so more Americans will take advantage of them — to help others and themselves.

"How can we afford not to spawn other programs?" asked Fried.

Sparking a Movement

Dychtwald's recent Merrill Lynch/Age Wave report, Giving in Retirement: America's Longevity Bonus, predicted that America's retirees will volunteer 58 billion hours over the next two decades.

I hope so. And here's hoping, as Irving says, the nation will "catalyze a movement for purposeful aging." Wouldn't it be great if that movement purposefully replicated the success of the civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement and the gay rights movement?

Then, those so-called "30 bonus years" we've been given (the average increase in longevity compared to a century ago) could help us live healthier, happier, longer lives.

Source: www.nextavenue.org