



Do Good, Feel Better

Want to feel healthier and happier? Volunteer for a good cause.

by: Maryann Hammers | from: [AARP VIVA](#) | October 2009



[En español](#) | When Yara Muro came to the United States from Cuba as a teen, she lived in a Catholic home for girls until her parents could join her. The nuns expected the girls to assume cleaning, cooking, and other chores. Though you'd expect many teens to complain, Muro liked helping out. "It made me feel good," she says.

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Muro, now 62, still feels good about helping out. For the past ten years, she has volunteered for [Catholic Hospice](#), relieving caregivers and brightening the day for terminally ill patients. "I could instead relax during my spare time, but this is more rejuvenating and rewarding," says Muro, a real estate agent in Miami. "It lifts my spirits to have something important to do. I actually feel younger."

Muro not only feels younger, but she may actually be staying healthier and happier—and even extending her life span. People who volunteer are less likely to report ailments or feel depressed, are more likely to be satisfied with life, and may even live longer, according to [dozens of studies](#). And those health benefits kick in for those who volunteer about 100 hours a year.

"Volunteers derive holistic benefits, with improved body, mind, and spiritual well-being," says Dr. Jorge Partida, a clinical psychologist licensed in Illinois and California, originally from Guadalajara, Mexico. He co-founded Los Compadres Sin Fronteras, a group that recruits volunteers to assist needy families.

First, he explains, volunteering helps people stay intellectually sharp as they learn new skills. Second, volunteering keeps them on their toes. Rather than sit around, volunteers are active. And finally, Partida says, volunteers derive spiritual satisfaction knowing they are changing the world for the better and enriching the lives of others.

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Giving Back: A Cultural Trait

The spiritual rewards of serving others resonate strongly with Hispanics, says Elaine DeBassige D'Amato, a licensed professional counselor who grew up in a small Hispanic village in New Mexico and now runs a consulting service for people in transition in Glendale, Colorado. "Volunteering gives people a place to belong, be wanted, use their strengths, and shine. Our culture is family- and community-based. Our core values can be found in volunteerism: collectivism, la raza, mi casa es su casa, and extended family systems. Giving back is an integral part of the culture."

It was the urge to give back that inspired Lyette Segerdahl, 59, who immigrated to the United States from Cuba when she was 12. "This country has been good to me, so I like to help people as I was helped," she says. She volunteers as a firefighter and emergency medical technician, serves on the beautification committee for her town, and interprets for Spanish-speaking patients at a free clinic in Norwalk, Connecticut.

Segerdahl says her busy volunteer schedule keeps her on top of her game. "Volunteering is not something I do to kill time," she says. "I have a full life: I sew, paint, and garden. I have chickens, ducks, rabbits, goats, and birds. I've been married for 30 years and have two children and two grandchildren. I make time to volunteer because it makes me happy to contribute. Volunteering also forces me to stay active and take care of my health, so as not to miss my volunteer activities."

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Health Benefits

Francisco "Frank" Romero, a 75-year-old retired elementary school principal with the Catholic Diocese of Dallas, has logged almost 150 hours as a volunteer at Methodist Dallas Medical Center, where he serves as an "ambassador," greeting and assisting arriving patients and visitors. He jokes that his volunteer gig is his personal "Fountain of Youth."

He may be right. A report published in [Archives of Internal Medicine](#) in June 2009 shows that the social interaction of volunteering helps seniors maintain better muscle strength, dexterity, and balance. "[Previous] studies have shown that cognitive and social activities in the elderly are associated with increased survival and a decreased risk of dementia," wrote researcher Dr. Aron Buchman, associate professor of neurological sciences at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago. "Our study extends these findings, showing that social activity late in life is closely linked with healthy motor function."

Social Impact

Volunteering is a great way to stay socially involved after retirement. "After 46 years in education, I need to still be surrounded by people," says Romero, an Arizona native of Mexican descent. "At the end of my four-hour shift, I feel invigorated and I know that I have made a difference. It gives me another reason for getting up in the morning. I feel an energy rush that permeates my entire system."

Even those who work full-time benefit from squeezing volunteer activities into an already crowded schedule. "There were times in my life when I needed encouragement," says Maria Monica Ranero Rapps, 53. "Now it's my turn to encourage others. My family is from Guatemala, and I am thankful to be the first to be born in the United States. I believe others deserve the opportunities we take for granted."

On top of her full-time job as a paralegal and pursuing her passion as a competitive golfer, she volunteers as a speaker and instructor in paralegal classes, works on charity golf events, notarizes estate-planning documents for

first responders, helps legal residents complete citizenship forms, and participates in various fundraising events.

Occasionally she gets tired, she admits, but that's a good thing: "The word 'boredom' is not in my vocabulary. If I didn't volunteer, perhaps my house would be cleaner. But my house will always be here. I am enjoying my life now."

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