

Here is an extract for an article published in the Costco magazine for December 2024 about the health benefits for volunteering as an older adult.

by ELLEN RYAN

# Helping hands

## How volunteer work is good for body and mind

When you offer your time, energy and enthusiasm as a volunteer, you're doing more than supporting a good cause. Done regularly, volunteering can also boost your emotional and physical health.

Ask the roughly 80 million non-profit volunteers in North America or the social scientists, who've studied the matter for years. They've concentrated on older people, but adults of all ages figure in studies.

Eric Kim, a psychologist who studies the connection between psychological well-being and physical health, co-authored a study in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* that followed people who volunteered at least two hours a week over four years. "Our minds and bodies are rewarded when we give to others," said Kim in an interview to promote the finding.

The study found that the volunteers Kim and colleagues followed showed not only less chance of early death but also reduced "physical functioning limitations."

Dr. Austin Hall, medical director of the University of North Carolina Center for Excellence in Community Mental Health, says, "Volunteering has been shown to have a positive effect on both mental health and cognitive abilities." In older adults "volunteering can delay cognitive decline."

Related research sorts health benefits into four general categories: physical positives, a range of mental and emotional positives, sense of purpose and social networks. Here's a look.

### **Physical benefits**

Through Girls on the Run Utah, Costco member Katrina Rieger gives her time to coaching 8- to 12-year-olds in both track and emotional resilience. Rieger and fellow coaches not only lead warm-ups and run alongside the girls, they also lead the day's discussion—for example, how to handle uncomfortable emotions—and then train for a 5K race.

### **An active mind**

William Kolodrubetz, who is retired from the Defense Intelligence Agency, has been a frequent master carpenter for Washington, DC-area theatre companies.

The Costco member teaches the use of drills, saws and ear protection while entertaining with puns and outbursts of song. "Every hour in the shop takes about two hours of prep—solving design problems, planning work teams, pulling lumber, pre-cutting components," says Kolodrubetz.

### **Purpose and self-worth**

In Spruce Grove, Alberta, Costco member John Dugas volunteers with the Canadian Association of Service Dog Trainers as the vice president of the board.

Through his volunteer work, the disability-retired veteran—who also co-runs a canine obedience business—trains future service dogs, meets donors, strategizes, budgets and coordinates other volunteers. "After the army, the next day you're nobody. It's a big challenge for veterans," notes Dugas. "Helping makes me more confident. It gives me the purpose I need to realign my life."

### **Stronger social networks**

A 2020 study by British researchers found that the association between volunteering and happiness is not simply because happier people are more likely to volunteer to begin with, but that people who start volunteering see an improvement in well-being.

"All this," says Kolodrubetz about his carpentry equipment, "gives me a fun, healthy, vibrant reason to get up in the morning and not worry about myself. It's fun to be wanted, and I want to have fun, all while making a contribution. What could be better?"

*Ellen Ryan is a freelance writer and volunteer in her community.*

#### **Why volunteer?**

Why offer your time? Volunteer Canada cites well-being, skill development and a sense of belonging—not to mention neighbourhood cohesion and citizen engagement.

"Volunteers lend their energy and talents, help their neighbours and strengthen their communities," said Akilah Watkins, president and CEO of Independent Sector, in a press release. "When you volunteer, you help hold up the foundation of civil society."—ER