The Benefits of Giving Back

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration’s (SAMHSA) working definition of recovery from mental disorders and/or substance use disorders delineates four major dimensions that support a life in recovery – Health, Home, Purpose, and Community.

Two key components of any person’s recovery are purpose and community. SAMHSA defines purpose as “meaningful daily activities, such as a job, school, volunteerism, family care-taking, or creative endeavors, and the independence, income, and resources to participate in society.” Community is defined as “relationships and social networks that provide support, friendship, love, and hope.”

Giving back provides an incredible opportunity to strengthen a person’s recovery by simultaneously helping to build a community and finding purpose. Giving back can be volunteering, participating in community service activities, or finding another way to make a positive impact on another individual’s life. The benefits of giving back spread beyond the service itself. Studies have shown that there is a significant relationship between volunteering and health.

For individuals newly in recovery it can be challenging to find purpose. Creating new social connections and forming meaningful bonds can be intimidating, complicating, and confusing. Volunteering and/or service activities can provide individuals with opportunities to build new connections in the community, form new and healthy relationships, and engage in meaningful work in support of a cause that is important to them. Service opportunities provide a pathway for individuals to engage in positive work that will help solidify their individual recovery while also helping others.

According to the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), “volunteer activities can strengthen the social ties that protect individuals from isolation during difficult times, while the experience of helping others leads to a sense of greater self-worth and trust.” Additionally, “even when controlling for other factors such as age, health, and gender, research has found that when individuals volunteer, they are more likely to live longer.”

### SAMHSA’s Working Definition of Recovery

“A process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential.”

### Health Benefits of Volunteering

A 2013 United Health Group study found that volunteering can help an individual feel better – physically, emotionally, and mentally. The study found that:

- 76% of people who volunteered in the last twelve months say that volunteering has made them feel healthier.
- 94% of people who volunteered in the last twelve months say that volunteering improves their mood.
- 78% of people who volunteered in the last twelve months say that volunteering lowers their stress levels.
- 95% of people who volunteered in the last twelve months say they are helping to make their community a better place.
- 96% of people who volunteered in the last twelve months say that volunteering enriches their sense of purpose in life.
- 80% of people who volunteered in the last twelve months say that they feel they have control over their health.
Giving back to others is an important part of any recovery journey. Through selflessness and acts of kindness, an individual in recovery can find the hope and motivation they need to continue on their recovery pathway. Giving back can help an individual:

- Improve self-esteem
- Boost resilience
- Foster feelings of empowerment
- Make their community a better place
- Discover meaning and purpose in life
- Develop new skills
- Stay connected to others
- Gain new perspectives

Individuals in recovery can give back to others with a mental illness and/or addiction by sharing their lived experience and becoming a sponsor, a mentor, or a peer supporter. Many are able to benefit from connecting with someone who has experienced similar situations who can serve as a guide, a mentor, and a motivator to help them remain resilient and keep their recovery on track. Conversely, an individual serving as a sponsor or a mentor can often strengthen their own recovery by helping someone else find their way on their recovery journey.

“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in service to others.”
~ Mahatma Gandhi

According to CNCS, the 2018 Volunteering in America report found that 77.34 million adults (30.3 percent) volunteered through an organization in the past year. Altogether, Americans volunteered nearly 6.9 billion hours, worth an estimated $167 billion in economic value. Millions more are supporting friends and family (43.1 percent) and doing favors for their neighbors (51.4 percent), suggesting that many are engaged in acts of “informal volunteering.” The research also found that Americans are generous with more than just their time. Overall, half of all citizens (52.2 percent) donated to charity last year.

## Volunteering Options and Ideas

Volunteering and providing service to others is an important way to support individual recovery and it has been shown to promote mental, emotional, and physical health. Some ideas for volunteering are included below:

- Become a sponsor
- Promote the love of reading
- Play with a shelter animal
- Spend time with the elderly
- Help someone register to vote
- Clean up local waterways
- Help maintain a hiking trail
- Coach a youth sports team
- Volunteer for a faith-based organization
- Help at a food pantry
- Become a big brother or big sister
- Provide support to kids with disabilities
- Deliver meals to individuals in need
- Plant flowers and/or trees
- Become a mentor
- Help out in a classroom
- Support a non-profit you care about
- Donate your old clothes
- Donate non-perishable food to a food bank
- Organize a community blood drive

Volunteering to help with any of these projects or in any of these categories not only will help the individual or organization you are supporting, it can also help you to reduce stress levels, boost confidence, and enjoy a sense of purpose and fulfillment.