

The helper's high

Why it feels so good to give. BY SANDER VAN DER LINDEN

FOR A SIGNIFICANT PART OF HUMAN history, giving to those less fortunate has been regarded as a desirable behavior. One obvious reason, of course, is that even a small sacrifice may make a world of difference to someone else. Thus charitable giving seems to be associated with potentially rewarding consequences.

What's particularly interesting, however, is that those consequences do not only pertain to the receiver. In fact, recent research has shed light on the psychological rewards

that people experience when they have given. For example, individuals who engage in charitable giving are often reported to be significantly happier and healthier than those who do not. An analysis performed in 2007 by Arthur Brooks of Syracuse University pointed out that givers were 42 percent more likely than non-givers to say they were "very happy" and 25 percent more likely to report they were "in excellent health."

So how can giving make us happier? Stephen Post and Jill Neimark highlight the

evolutionary benefits of helping in their book *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*. According to the authors, when helping benefits the group, it will be associated with pleasure and happiness. In particular, Neimark and Post comment that feelings of compassion, benevolence and kindness leave less room for negative emotions. Experimental evidence also suggests that helping others is related to many positive mental and physical health outcomes, including weight control, lower blood pressure and



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relief from depression and chronic pain. Following these findings, an obvious next step has been to look at people's brains when they engage in—or even think about—charitable giving.

A research team led by neuroscientist Jorge Moll at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) found that when individuals donate money, the brain's mesolimbic system is activated. The mesolimbic system is part of the reward reinforcement system, known for modulating behavioral responses to stimuli (food, sex, drugs, money) that activate feelings of reward and reinforcement. In particular, the decision to donate is associated with a part of the brain involved in social bonding and releases "feel-good" neurotransmitters such as oxytocin and vasopressin. When doing good makes people feel good, these

neurotransmitters can be addictive. Psychologists refer to this virtuous cycle as "the helper's high."

My own research points to the fact that someone's moral norm—an internal code of conduct or moral conviction—is the strongest psychological predictor of charitable intentions. While social psychologists support the notion that cultural pressure drives donating, I found no significant effect related to the influence of explicit social factors. This suggests that when people give, it is unlikely that their good intentions are guided by beliefs about what others expect. Instead, I found that people's giving intentions are strongly guided by their moral convictions. This finding also makes sense in light of the evidence that when people give, they experience feelings of sympathy and compassion,

emotions strongly linked to moral behavior. And given the potential benefits to individual health and happiness, this inner feeling of goodness associated with charitable giving may well originate from a conscious or unconscious awareness of its rewarding consequences.

The comedian Bob Hope once said, "If you haven't got any charity in your heart, you have the worst kind of heart trouble." This is not just a joke. In our heart of hearts, we know charitable giving is the right thing to do. ■

SANDER VAN DER LINDEN is a doctoral researcher in experimental social psychology at the London School of Economics and Political Science and the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment.