

May You Give and Glow

Stephen G. Post



Hidden inward gifts flow from helping others. These gifts include freeing the self from emptiness, hostility, rumination, or other destructive emotions and introducing a deep, fulfilling radiance. It is not how much we give but rather how much kindness we put into the giving that creates the glow.

Kind giving is more than just an external action. It includes a light-handed interest in the recipient as a person, or put differently, a curiosity that includes a readiness to listen to them respectfully. Kindness comes from the heart.

But what is kindness? We all understand the point when someone suggests that we could have been a little kinder, or when someone politely mentions that it is better to be always kind than always right. The proven truth is that kind giving, unrestrained by transactional consciousness, builds meaning and tranquility within. Human beings are like hard-wired glow sticks—those translucent plastic tubes containing substances that light up when combined in a chemical reaction.

The Glow State

The oft-quoted words of the 20th-century Hindu sage Jiddu Krishnamurti provide perspective into the merely hedonic form of happiness: “It is no measure of health to be well-adjusted to a profoundly sick society.”

Materialism and the culture of narcissism we have created are now on the verge of total collapse, propped up by the thousands of psychiatrists busy medicating younger and younger individuals who are bottoming out in our cathedrals of consumerism. So many are suffering from affluenza, addictions, and squandered educational opportunities.

Happiness in the deepest sense is equivalent to inner peace, the quiet feeling that a life is meaningful and has been well lived over time, usually as a by-product of contributing to the lives of others.

Kindness activates the part of the brain (the “mesolimbic pathway”) that produces dopamine, one of the brain’s several “happiness” or “peace” chemicals. People who are actively helping have elevated levels of oxytocin, widely described as the hormone of tranquility and trust.

Giving defies the second law of thermodynamics in numerous exceptionally happy individuals, because it seems not to run down or use itself up. Instead, giving with kindness results in more kindness to be given.

Benefits of Kind Giving

When we are giving, we are freed from preoccupation with the disappointments and betrayals that are part of life. Simple acts of kindness can transform us emotionally when we get sucked down

into despair and resentment. It is often said that you should smile even if you do not feel happy, and happiness will likely follow. Emotions follow actions, just as actions follow emotions.

Selfishness is just boring. The world becomes full and engaging when we seek the happiness, security, and well-being of another in creative love. It is impossible to be bored if you love your neighbor.

Kindness gives us a reason to develop our gifts. Students learn more when they have to tutor younger peers, or when they learn in groups and are responsible for teaching one another. Most great people have fine-tuned their talents in the service of neighbors.

We make deeper friendships when we treat others with kindness. Our friends are no longer the people we just hang out with; they are the ones with whom we find exhilarating common causes and commitments. Finally, we have serious friends, the kind who are loyal and want to keep us on our course and true to our higher selves.

Kindness to others is a source of hope. When we use our strengths to make a difference in the life of another, we can have greater confidence in shaping the future. This is an active hope, rather than the passive variety that just waits for a surprise.

Kind giving creates a sense of dignity or worth. Our dignity is ours to claim when we treat another person with love.

Love responds to the deepest of human needs—the need for *significance*. We find significance in our lives in giving.

Kind giving is the origin of our moral and creative energy. Love energy enables us to use our gifts creatively and morally.

Kind giving pushed out our destructive emotions. It has been written, “Perfect love casts out fear.” It casts out hatred, bitterness, hostility, vindictiveness, rage, and jealousy as well.

Practical Tips for Successful Volunteering

True purpose and kind giving are often manifest in volunteering, an activity that has to be carefully managed. It can be frustrating if you don’t feel cut out for what you’re doing, and if you do not tap into kindness. It’s often better to find ways to help in which you are using your strengths and talents. But many volunteers want to do something completely different from what they are used to, and they may find it refreshing and innovative.

Find your niche. If you’re involved in a spiritual community, that’s a great place to start. Many have needs for volunteers, ranging from one-time events to weekly assistance. Contact the office and ask if there are any volunteer opportunities.

Contact organizations directly and ask for a volunteer application, even if they do not have an opportunity available immediately. Projects usually come along.

The United Way is always a good resource to help connect would-be volunteers with organizations, as is the local Chamber of Commerce. Libraries, hospitals, and hospices are always in need of dedicated volunteers.

If you have not yet identified your volunteer passion, [VolunteerMatch](#) is the “The Angi of volunteering.” It’s easy to use: type in your zip code and click on the topic that interests you. Type in “animals” and you’ll discover many volunteer opportunities within a half hour of your home. The listings describe the need, the most useful skills, best age range, time expected, and a way to contact the organization.

Another website that lists volunteer opportunities is [Points of Light](#).

Donating money out of the kindness of your heart can be beneficial to you. A feeling of joy and meaningfulness accompanies writing a check to help the needy. But the impact of such actions is less than that achieved with active engagement in helping others.

This explains in part why so many people in philanthropy want to be actively involved in the organizations and activities of the programs to which they donate. They are looking for a new and

more fulfilling way of life in a world of affluence, materialism, and consumerism.

Here are some quick tips for you to use when you are ready for volunteering:

1. **Help one person every day.** Stick with this practice, especially when you're having a bad day.
2. **Mindfully keep a kind heart.** Each morning, ask yourself how you can best love the people you will encounter today. Envision them and their needs, and determine how you might support them.
3. You may wish to **focus on giving behavior that draws on your talents and strengths.** People tend to continue helping others when they are doing things that showcase their skills. But you can also try something new.
4. **Contact groups whose interests you share.** If you think you are alone in your passion for a particular cause, think again. There are countless organizations looking for people who want to help.
5. **Create a helping-happiness network.** Once you identify an individual or a group that you feel called to help, get

involved right away. Invite your friends to come with you and be part of a little network of helping.

6. **Try something else** if you are not finding your activity gratifying.
7. **Cultivate new and deeper friendships with fellow helpers**, and acknowledge and celebrate what you are all doing.
8. **Do not become overwhelmed.** The typical volunteer in America is helping others in organized venues for about two hours a week. Most of the studies on the health benefits of volunteering are focused on this level of commitment. People in the helping professions do not need to volunteer because they already deeply engaged in compassionate care; they can, of course, still volunteer if they so choose.

Rx: Volunteer—“It’s Good to be Good”

One online survey sampled American adults to find out who is volunteering and what they get out of it.[\[1\]](#) The survey indicated that 41% of Americans volunteered for an average of 100 hours per year. Also, 69% percent of the participants reported donating money in addition to volunteering.

What effect did this activity have on those who volunteered and gave? The outcomes are as follows:

- 73% said that volunteering “lowered my stress levels” (serenity)
- 89% agreed that “volunteering improved my sense of well-being”
- 92% felt an “enriched sense of purpose in life”
- 68% said volunteering “made me feel physically healthier”
- 77% said that volunteering “improves emotional health”
- 78% said that volunteering “helps recovery from loss and disappointment”

Volunteering improved sleeping and friendships. It also reduced anxiety and the sense of helplessness.

If a pill promised this much benefit, investors would mark it a “strong buy.” But no existing pill does this much good, and kindness is something you actively do, rather than something you passively swallow.

A total of 100 hours per year, spread out to about two hours per week, is enough time to get immersed in an activity on a regular and sustainable basis. Individuals differ psychologically and physically,

and they must balance their varying commitments to the nearest and the neediest.

There is no particular dose of volunteering that should be prescribed for every individual, other than to state that a couple of hours per week seems to make an impact on well-being. Exceeding this threshold does not increase benefits. I refer to this as the “two-hour shift effect.”

A caveat is in order: the Rx for two hours/week is a composite figure. Adolescents may just need one hour a week, while older adults in retirement may benefit most from four.

A surprisingly small amount of time devoted to showing kindness to others can begin to settle deep peace in your heart and radiate satisfaction. Be kind, and you’ll start to glow.

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[Stephen G. Post](#), Ph.D., is a leader in research on the benefits of giving and on compassionate care in relation to improved patient outcomes and caregiver well-being. With philanthropist Sir John Templeton, Post co-founded [The Institute for Research on Unlimited Love](#) in 2001. He is the author of the bestselling *Why Good Things Happen to Good People: How to Live a Longer, Healthier, Happier Life by the Simple Act of Giving*, among other books.