

## The science of soul

**Yes, helping others makes us feel warm and fuzzy, but new research suggests that doing good deeds can actually help people live longer, healthier lives. Siri Agrell explains why positive action may be better than popping pills**

**SIRI AGRELL**  
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What if your doctor told you to take two steps toward being a better person and call him in the morning?

Patients at a California health maintenance organization are being prescribed generous behaviour as part of a program called Rx: Volunteer, one of various new research projects described by Stephen Post in his book *Why Good Things Happen To Good People*, out next week. Dr. Post chronicles the link between doing good and living a longer, healthier life.

“The science shows that we're hardwired to be giving,” he says. “We're talking here about a one-a-day vitamin for the soul.”

A growing number of researchers are supporting his claim with studies that show how the human body benefits from everything from gratitude to generosity.

### Internet Links

- **The Karma Meter:** How good is yours? [☞](#)



Dr. Post, the president of Case Western Reserve University's Institute for Research on Unlimited Love, believes in the scientific equivalent to *The Secret*, the self-help phenomenon that preaches positivity as a means to personal reward.

No, being a good person won't necessarily get you a new car or help you lose 10 pounds, Dr. Post says, but there is a karma of the brain, where the body physically rewards acts of kindness and forgiveness. “The remarkable bottom line of the science of love is that giving protects overall health twice as much as Aspirin protects against heart disease,” he says.

For example, psychologist Robert Emmons studied organ-transplant recipients and found that the more gratitude they felt, the faster they recovered.

A 2001 study of trauma survivors by psychologist Russell Kolts found that gratitude was associated with lower symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

And a Wellesley College study that has tracked 200 people since the 1920s, interviewing them for five hours every decade, found that people who were charitable in high school had better physical and mental health in late adulthood.

“The connection for mental health is particularly strong, but the physical health results are also highly significant,” psychologist Paul Wink notes.

Helping other people can aid in personal relaxation and stress as well.

Researchers at the University of Michigan found that people who offered social support to others in a financial crisis saw a marked reduction in their own anxiety about money.

The movement toward studying human goodness has even spawned its own diagnostic manual, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*.

It was written to contrast the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, which doctors use to classify human behaviour by pathology.

Dr. Post, whose institute offers funding to many of these studies, believes that people who want to prolong their lives should work on their attitude, the same way they would change their diet or exercise routines.

And he thinks the culture is ready for a shift toward the positive.

He was encouraged by the behaviour of some young people in the aftermath of last month's mass shooting at Virginia Tech, who reached out to one another online and promised to be kinder to strangers.

“The truth is ours we have a duty to be true to ourselves. Smile at people you usually never even looked at talk to people u hated,” Quebec student Pierre-Olivier Laforce wrote in a Facebook post quoted in The New York Times.

And also last month Ryan Fitzgerald, an unemployed 20-year-old from Boston, received more than 5,000 calls after posting his phone number on YouTube for strangers who needed to talk.

Mr. Fitzgerald said he was inspired by Juan Mann, an Australian whose efforts to hug strangers landed him as a guest on Oprah Winfrey's couch.

And the impulse to take a higher road is not just infecting idealistic young people.

Toronto consultant Peggie Pelosi decided she needed to rethink her priorities while working as a vice-president at a health sciences company. After establishing a charitable partnership for her employees, she watched their productivity soar. She now helps companies form philanthropic partnerships and has written a book, *Corporate Karma: How Business Can Move Forward By Giving Back*.

"I think there's a lack of opportunity for people to find and express compassion," she says of her baby-boomer generation. "We've gotten to the point in our lives where we would like to have some meaning."

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