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Older Singaporeans who volunteer perceive a better quality of life, finds study

by Nanyang Technological University



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A new study by Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (NTU Singapore) and Duke-NUS Medical School (Duke-NUS) has found that compared to non-volunteers, older adults who volunteer feel more supported by their social networks, which in turn leads to an improvement in their quality of life. This is even though social networks from which older adults receive actual help do not expand as a result of volunteering.

Through a study of 2,887 Singaporeans aged 60 and above, the NTU Singapore and Duke-NUS researchers also found that those who volunteered regularly with a club or an organization reported

having more control of their lives—also known as personal mastery—leading to a better quality of life.

These findings were derived from data collected in the Transitions in Health, Employment, Social Engagement and Inter-Generational Transfers in Singapore Study (THE SIGNS Study), a nationally representative longitudinal survey of older Singaporeans. THE SIGNS Study is conducted by the Duke-NUS Center for Aging Research and Education (CARE).

The findings, published in *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, highlight that volunteering may provide alternative avenues of perceived support for older adults, beyond co-residing family members. This is especially important in Asian populations, where older adults traditionally depend on family members, said the researchers.

With demographic trends such as an aging population and shrinking family sizes, sole reliance on co-residing family for support in later life may become unsustainable. Older adults may have to supplement support from immediate family with support from alternative sources, the researchers added.

NTU Assistant Professor of Sociology Shannon Ang, who led the study, said, "While volunteering among older adults in Singapore has increased over the years, the rates remain low. Our findings show that volunteering increases the quality of life among older adults through perceived social support.

"Older adults who volunteer regularly in a formal setting also feel more confident in their ability to direct their own lives and make an impact on others. We hope our study brings home the idea that by helping others, older adults are also helping themselves."

Associate Professor Rahul Malhotra, Deputy Director of CARE at Duke-NUS, who supervised the study, said, "As Singapore's population ages rapidly, we need a deeper understanding of how volunteering can impact social and psychological well-being of our older adults. Our findings will enable organizations to better design volunteering programs so that older adults can fully benefit from them.

"Having a sustained and structured setting for volunteering provides opportunities for older people to actively shape their environments, boosting their confidence as they continue to contribute to society."

The study is in line with the recently refreshed national Action Plan for Successful Aging to empower older adults to take charge of their physical and mental well-being and enable them to continue contributing their knowledge and expertise.

It also supports NTU's goal of responding to the needs and challenges of healthy living and aging as part of NTU2025, the University's five-year strategic plan. For Duke-NUS, the School is committed to harnessing the intellectual acuity of its Signature Research Programs and centers to investigate complex and challenging topics such as aging, to advance conversations on the national health care agenda and enhance quality of care for all Singaporeans.

How the study was conducted

To explore how volunteering influences older adults' quality of life, the research team analyzed data from 2,887 Singaporeans, aged 60 years and above, who were tracked over a period of two to three years. Study participants were interviewed using structured questionnaires in THE SIGNS Study.

The first wave of the survey took place from 2016 to 2017, while the second wave was done in 2019 to follow up on the impact of volunteering on the same group of participants.

Study participants were asked about their volunteering activities in the past one year and grouped into three categories: non-volunteers, non-regular volunteers (who volunteered less than once a month), and regular volunteers (who volunteered at least once a month).

Participants who volunteered were asked how often they volunteered, and the type of volunteer work they did: either formally through groups, clubs or organizations (e.g., fundraising, visits) or informally (e.g., helping non-family members with activities such as babysitting or doing household work).

Using questionnaires that have been validated in previous studies, the researchers asked participants about perceived social support, the actual help they received from their social networks (e.g., material goods, emotional support or advice) over one year, and the number of people in their social network whom they received such help from.

Participants were also asked to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements relating to the level of control they felt over their lives, which is a measure of their level of personal mastery.

Quality of life of the participants was assessed by asking them to rate how frequently, from never to often, they felt the way described by a set of 11 statements, which included "feel that [their] life has meaning" or "look forward to each day" or "feel satisfied with the way [their] life has turned out." The set of statements assessing quality of life has been validated by Duke-NUS researchers in Singapore prior to the study.

The researchers statistically analyzed the survey response data to investigate the effect of volunteering on participants' quality of life through measuring perceived social support, received social support, and personal mastery.

Better quality of life through volunteering

Based on data from the surveys, the researchers found that participants reported better quality of life through stronger perceived social support, regardless of how frequently they volunteered and whether it was in a formal or informal setting. This is likely due to the value of creating new social networks built through volunteering, an intrinsically social activity, said the researchers.

However, volunteering did not translate into an expansion of social networks from whom older adults received actual forms of support.

The researchers explained that this could be due to prevailing norms in Singapore, where the responsibility to provide social support and meet the needs of older adults falls primarily on their children. This is also in line with an earlier study by the same NTU and Duke-NUS research team, which found that few older adults in Singapore receive support from non-child sources.

"While volunteering may expand the range of potential sources from which older adults can draw support from, longstanding norms around the propriety of providing help to (and receiving from) non-family members may hinder translation into actual support," the researchers added.

Volunteering could also promote personal mastery in older adults, but only if they do so regularly (e.g., more than once a month) and in a structured way (e.g., in formal settings), such as helping an organization to fundraise or organize events.

With the study confirming the positive effects of volunteering and explaining how it works to improve quality of life, the researchers suggest looking into maximizing its potential moving forward.

One way is by providing a structured and purpose-driven volunteering environment that could help older adults reap the full benefits of volunteering, making a strong case for how helping others helps oneself, said the researchers.

More information: Shannon Ang et al, How Helping You Helps Me: A Longitudinal Analysis of Volunteering and Pathways to Quality of Life Among Older Adults in Singapore, *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* (2024). DOI: [10.1093/geronb/gbae013](https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbae013)

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