

# An Overlooked Cure for Loneliness

Science tells us the solution may lie in what we do for others, not ourselves.



By Christina Caron

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Well before a global pandemic tore us away from our loved ones, and the Omicron variant threatened to upend holiday plans, experts were warning of “an epidemic of loneliness” in the United States.

Three in five Americans surveyed in 2019 reported feeling lonely, which the researchers attributed to a variety of factors, including a lack of social support, infrequent meaningful social interactions, poor physical and mental health and an imbalance in daily activities. In addition, nearly one quarter of those 65 and older are considered socially isolated, according to the National Health and Aging Trends Study.

Loneliness often stems from unwanted solitude. But it is also driven by a discrepancy between how you perceive your relationships versus what you want (or expect) from them. That disconnect is why you can be surrounded by family at Christmas and still feel like an outsider.

A potential cure? Kindness toward others. Something as simple as volunteering can improve our health, ease feelings of loneliness and broaden our social networks, studies suggest. Opportunities to give back — both in person and virtually — are more commonplace than they were last year, and the need for volunteers hasn’t let up, especially at food pantries.

“Volunteering is one of the best, most certain ways we can find a purpose and meaning in our life,” said Val Walker, the author of “400 Friends and No One to Call: Breaking Through Isolation and Building Community.”

## The benefits of volunteering.

In a study of 10,000 volunteers in Britain, about two-thirds agreed that their volunteering had helped them feel less isolated, particularly those ages 18 to 34.

Sam Boyd, 24, the director of volunteer management at Special Olympics Maryland, said she sees even her most withdrawn volunteers “come alive” during a shift, and by the end of the day, “they’re fist bumping and elbow tapping with other people.”

When volunteering, you can also “get to know more about yourself and broaden your view of the world,” she added.



New York Cares volunteers arranging donated flowers with BloomAgainBklyn, a nonprofit that has continued to operate throughout the pandemic. The bouquets are delivered to people who are socially isolated. Simbarashe Cha for The New York Times







Mill Jonakait, 75, has worked with BloomAgainBklyn since its inception. “Who wouldn’t love being able to make bouquets from a selection of dozens of different kinds of flowers?” she asked. “It’s just a lot of fun.” Simbarashe Cha for The New York Times

Among older adults, social isolation and loneliness are associated with higher rates of mortality, depression and cognitive decline.

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Experts say that volunteering not only helps people feel less lonely, it can also improve physical well-being.

A five-year study of more than 800 people in Detroit found that helping others who don’t live with you can act as a buffer against the negative effects of stress. Although the study participants encountered stressful life events like illness, job loss or financial difficulties, those who spent time doing tasks for others — like errands, child care and housework — were less likely to die than those who had not helped others.

AARP Foundation Experience Corps, an intergenerational tutoring program, found numerous benefits to volunteering: More than 85 percent of volunteers felt that their lives had improved because of their involvement with the program and 98 percent reported that the program helped them stay physically and mentally active, said Lisa Marsh Ryerson, president of AARP Foundation, the charitable affiliate of AARP.

“People want to matter and to be valued across their life,” Ms. Ryerson said.

## How much volunteering do you need to do?







Meg Goble volunteering with BloomAgainBklyn. Research shows volunteering can have positive effects on not only mental health, but physical well-being. Simbarashe Cha for The New York Times

Gary Bagley, executive director of New York Cares, the largest volunteer organization in New York City, suggested setting a small goal at first, like volunteering once a week or even once a month, and building from there.

“One of the biggest mistakes you can make is to decide ‘I will volunteer twice everyday for the next year’ because you’ll burn yourself out on it,” he said. “So think of something that’s manageable for you — not frightening in its scope of commitment — and just take the first step.”

Research suggests that volunteering consistently is what appears to reap the most benefits. In one study, widowers ages 51 and above who volunteered two or more hours a week felt less lonely — and were no lonelier than the married volunteers.

Meg Goble, 68, a real estate lawyer who lives in Brooklyn, began volunteering with New York Cares 17 years ago.

“In my other life, I’m a lawyer,” she said. “I like my job,” she added, but “it’s not as fulfilling as it used to be.”

Ms. Goble lives alone, but in her work as a volunteer — helping elementary school students with their homework and arranging flowers with BloomAgainBklyn — she is continually socializing.



During the pandemic, she also found ways to volunteer from a distance by doing virtual mock interviews with immigrants preparing to take the U.S. citizenship test and writing over 400 letters to seniors in nursing homes and assisted living facilities.

## Tips on choosing a volunteer activity

If you're interested in volunteering, websites like Volunteer Match, AmeriCorps, Idealist, United Way and the AARP can direct you toward in-person or virtual volunteer opportunities in your area.

Be sure to ask what rules the organization has in place to keep volunteers safe. Some require their volunteers to be fully vaccinated and masked, for example. If you're feeling uneasy about indoor settings, you can choose to volunteer in well-ventilated, uncrowded places, or outdoors.

Even during the height of the pandemic, Patricia Novy of Clark, N.J., 72, a retired art teacher and former Girl Scout leader, rallied former teachers, family members and neighbors to fill Easter baskets and Christmas stockings for those who could not afford them. They were distributed by Family Promise, an organization that assists low-income families with housing and other services.

"I was determined not to let that lockdown situation bring my mood down," Ms. Novy said.

The type of activity you choose matters less than whether you find it meaningful, said Ms. Walker, the "400 Friends and No One to Call" author. In her 25 years as a rehabilitation counselor, mostly in Virginia and Maine, she placed her clients in volunteer activities to help them build confidence and develop social skills.

"They used volunteering as a bridge to help them reconnect to the community," Ms. Walker said.

Some worked toward a political or environmental cause. Others were driven to share a passion, like woodworking.

Think also about the type of environment in which you would like to volunteer and whether it will facilitate social interactions, Ms. Walker said.

If you help out at a museum, for example, you can meet larger groups of people than if you were volunteering one-on-one as a tutor, she added.

## 'I have this whole real purpose now'

Some volunteers are driven to heal others — and themselves.

Robyn Houston-Bean, 52, said when her 20-year-old son Nick died of an accidental overdose in 2015 after participating in a drug-treatment program, she went from being "a real go-getter always doing a million things" to sitting numb on the couch for months.

"The last thing I expected was for him to die," she said.

Ms. Houston-Bean founded the Sun Will Rise Foundation to help those suffering from substance abuse. She said it allows her to honor the memory of her son, who died of an overdose, "while at the same time helping so many other people." M. Scott Brauer for The New York Times



Her friends and extended family were also in shock, she said, and she found it hard to process her grief with them, largely because this kind of loss was not something any of them had ever experienced. Several months after his death, Ms. Houston-Bean discovered a volunteer organization that distributed clothing, food and other supplies to drug users living on the streets. She was intrigued. Her sister urged her to check it out in person.

When she finally did, she found a nonjudgmental space full of volunteers whose loved ones had also been touched by addiction. Soon, she was heading out once a month to help those in need.

“I felt like I could give my mothering to them that I couldn’t give to Nick anymore,” Ms. Houston-Bean said.

Later that year she started a peer grief support group for those who have lost someone they love to substance abuse — the first of its kind in Braintree, Mass., her hometown. It became so popular that she created a nonprofit and found enough volunteer facilitators to run 13 groups in different parts of the state.

“It takes the focus off of my grief and puts it somewhere else,” she said. “I have this whole real purpose now.”