

Study shows volunteering benefits those with functional limitations

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Volunteering is known to provide health benefits to the person doing the volunteering. Now, a new study finds that older adults with functional limitations (trouble conducting daily tasks like cooking meals) in particular appear to reap the benefits from helping others.

The new study addresses the question of whether the impact of volunteering on risk of [mortality](#) was stronger for older adults with or without functional limitations.

"As functional limitations increase, the risk of dying increases, but not among those who volunteered," said Morris Okun, an Arizona State University professor of [psychology](#). "By helping other people, you are actually helping yourself."

With the leading edge of the [Baby Boomers](#) approaching 65 years old, the study raises some interesting possibilities for our nation, Okun said.

Okun is the lead author of "Does volunteering moderate the relation between functional limitations and mortality?" published in the November 2010 issue of [Social Science & Medicine](#). Okun and his co-authors – Kristin August and Karen Rook, of the University of California-Irvine, and Jason Newsom of Portland State University – obtained their findings from secondary data analysis of a longitudinal study conducted by Rook.

The study used baseline survey data from a representative sample of 916

non-institutionalized adults 65 years old and older who lived in the continental U.S. Data on mortality were extracted six years later from the National Death Index.

The researchers focused on the relationships among functional limitations, volunteering and mortality. Okun said in this case functional limitations are physical and not cognitive, so they more are along the lines of not being able to carry a bag of groceries or not being able to drive a car.

"We found that people with functional limitations are benefitting more from volunteering in terms of longevity than the people who are free of functional limitations," Okun said. "It is also true that people with functional limitations are less likely to volunteer, so it is paradoxical that those who would benefit the most from volunteering, also are less likely to volunteer."

Okun said the researchers controlled for many variables and the relationship between functional limitations, volunteering and mortality remained.

"There appears to be something unique happening in terms of how functional limitations and volunteering work together to influence mortality," Okun said.

While the authors could not identify the mechanism for this effect, Okun did say that it could be that by volunteering older people feel more useful.

"People who have the beginning of a set of functional limitations are the kinds of people who are experiencing some diminished sense of usefulness. We know that a sense of usefulness is a predictor of mortality in older people," Okun explained.

"We are arguing that the experience of functional limitations may be accompanied by an erosion of their sense of 'how can I contribute.' If we give older people with functional limitations a way to restore their sense of usefulness, then we may be able to compensate for, or off set, the effect of [functional limitations](#) on mortality. Volunteering may very well provide one of those opportunities."

Demographics are enhancing the importance of this finding, Okun said.

"From a policy point of view, some doomsayers are making catastrophic projections on what will happen as the Boomers age," he said. "But we need to start thinking about the assets they bring with them."

"People who volunteer, particularly those with some health problems, benefit from it," he added. "On the other hand, our society is teeming with social problems that require the involvement of nonprofits and volunteers. This is a win-win situation."

"The Boomers are not going to be envelope lickers," Okun added. "They are looking for something more rewarding than that. We need to think about meaningful ways to engage them as part of the volunteer labor force."

Provided by Arizona State University

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