

Charity Work—How & Why to Do It

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As a mental health professional, I believe that being involved in some type of on-going charitable work is an important component to mental health and happiness. Participating in charity work adds a special meaning and purpose to your life. Charity work also creates a sense of connection and belongingness to the greater human family of which we are all a part. It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the endless problems of the world and want to withdraw into a sheltered haven where you don't have to think about the pain of the world. However, it is my firm belief that this retreat strategy does not really work; human beings are psychologically tribal animals, and need to participate in improving the welfare of the "tribe" in order to feel complete.

Every person has something of value to offer the world, you just need to find the niche that is right for you. Charity can be in the form of donating time and energy, or financial resources, or a combination of both. Let me discuss volunteering time and energy first.

In order for your involvement in charitable work to be a satisfying and rewarding experience, you have to choose charity work that fits your temperament. You need to do some self reflection about what kind of experiences would work best for you. Factors you need to consider include:

- 1) Is it important for your charity work to be solution based i.e. involve getting at the root of a problem? Or do you have more of a "I made someone's life better life in a small, personal way today" kind of perspective?
- 2) Do you want to be involved in trying to change people's opinions?
- 3) Do you prefer to work in small, medium, or large groups, or on your own?
- 4) Do you want to be directly involved with the population you are helping?
- 5) Do you want to be in a leadership role?
- 6) Do you want to work on local, national, or international issues?
- 7) Are you willing to work on issues that will probably include set backs and where change will tend to happen small steps at a time?
- 8) Is it important to you that your charity work is intellectually stimulating?
- 9) Is it important to you that your charity work utilizes your creativity?
- 10) Do you prefer charity work that is low key i.e. no meetings, on-going responsibilities, etc.--you just show up and work?

Mulling over these questions will help you decide whether you would prefer stuffing envelopes in a room full of people to help get a politician elected who you strongly support, verses something like

volunteering in a nursing home, or setting up a scholarship fund for art/music students. Your charitable contribution does not have to be something that qualifies you for the Nobel Peace Prize. It need only be a gift from the heart. Some people have great symphonies or scientific inventions to give to the world, and that's great. But planting trees or cleaning up litter is just as noble.

In addition to temperament considerations, you also need to clarify what issues most interest and motivate you. Reviewing the following list may help you zero in on what area of volunteer work you feel most called to.

- Animal Welfare
- Endangered Species
- Native American Issues
- Community Building
- Prison Reform
- Homelessness
- Mental Health Spiritual Health Education
- Migrant Worker Issues
- Gay Rights
- Music or Art Related Charity
- Third World Hunger or Poverty
- Nutrition/Health Education
- Environmental Protection
- Life Enrichment for Economically Disadvantaged Adults
- Life Enrichment for Economically Disadvantaged Children
- Nature Preservation/Parks Development
- Political Change Regarding Racism
- Political Change Regarding Sexism
- Political Change Regarding World Peace
- Police Brutality
- Working on Political Campaigns
- Working with Emotionally Troubled Children/Teens
- Working with Developmentally Disabled Adults
- Working with Developmentally Disabled Children
- Working with the Elderly
- Working with a Suicide Prevention Program
- Working with People with Addiction Issues
- Working with Physically Ill Adults
- Working with Physically Ill Children
- Working with Physically Disabled Adults
- Working with Physically Disabled Children
- Working with Abused Women
- Working with Children in the Foster-Care System
- Working with Pregnant Teens

In addition to volunteering some time, energy and labor to charitable causes, you might want to consider tithing a portion of your income to charity every month. It is kind of a tricky thing deciding how much money is appropriate to donate to charity. Obviously, it makes sense to devote a certain percentage of your disposable income to enrich your own life. But at what point do you have enough, such that it makes sense to think about helping to improve the quality of life for others, or future generations? I think a good way to address this dilemma is by asking yourself questions like these:

“How much of the planet’s energy and resources does it make sense for me to consume?”

“How many of the goods and services I purchase actually increase the quality of my life in a significant way?”

“How much money do I need to lead a comfortable but balanced lifestyle?”

Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin in their book Your Money or Your Life do a good job of describing how we need to examine our relationship to money. **Let me quote from their book:**

“Part of the secret to life, it would seem, comes from identifying for yourself that point of maximum fulfillment. There is a name for this peak of the fulfillment curve, and it provides the basis for transforming your relationship with money. It’s a word we use every day, yet we are practically incapable of recognizing it when it’s staring us in the face. The word is “enough.” At the peak of the Fulfillment Curve we have enough. Enough for our survival. Enough comforts. And even enough little “luxuries”.

We have everything we need; there’s nothing extra to weigh us down, distract or distress us, nothing we’ve bought on time, have never used and are slaving to pay off. Enough is a fearless place. A trusting place. An honest and self-observant place. It’s appreciating and fully enjoying what money brings into your life and yet never purchasing anything that isn’t needed and wanted.”

...So what’s all that stuff beyond enough--beyond the peak, where the Fulfillment Curve begins to go down? Clutter, that’s what! Clutter is anything that is excess--for you. It’s whatever you have that doesn’t serve you, yet takes up space in your world. To let go of clutter, then is not deprivation, it’s lightening up and opening up space for something new to happen. ... Enough is a wide and stable plateau. It is a place of alertness, creativity and freedom. From this place, being suffocated under a mountain of clutter that must be stored, cleaned, moved, gotten rid of and paid for in time is a fate worse than death.

...What creates clutter? The Fulfillment Curve strongly suggests that most clutter enters our lives through the “more is better” door. It comes from the disease of materialism, of looking for inner fulfillment in outer possessions...”

I suspect that if most of us middle-class or upper-class Americans were to examine our spending habits, we would discover some amount of over-consumption: Most of us would realize that we went zooming past “enough” without realizing we had. At some point, channeling money towards charitable endeavors will bring far more spiritual fulfillment than the immediate gratification of purchasing another “toy” or taking another vacation.

However, for charitable donations to feel good to you, the giver, I think certain guidelines need to be followed: Charitable giving feels good when you are giving to people who are engaged in helping themselves, or to those who truly need help. Charity should help victims, not people who are playing victim. Charity does not significantly help people who are caught up in self-destructive behavior patterns. Charitable help works when the recipient has reached a state of accepting responsibility for the changes he/she needs to make to improve his/her life. Likewise, charitable giving feels more rewarding

when you give to people exhibiting a work ethic; people who are working hard but simply do not make enough money for a decent quality of life (the growing class of working poor), rather than donating to programs that encourage people to live on charitable hand-outs instead of working.

I want to mention another form of charitable giving-- gifts we can give to the world that will not cost us any money, and do not require a time commitment. We can give our fellow human beings some important gifts: patience, acceptance, and tolerance of diversity. In our personal relationships with our spouse/significant other, friends, co-workers and extended family members, offering patience and acceptance can work wonders. The renowned psychotherapist, Carl Rogers, said that the best way to promote change and growth in a person is to fully accept him or her where he or she is in the present. Rogers preached for fifty years that unconditional positive regard is the most effective way to foster human beings' propensity for positive growth and evolution.

In our capacity as a citizen of this strife filled planet, tolerance of diversity can be our personal way of contributing to world peace. Intolerance of diversity has been one of the prime causes of wars throughout history. Most of us have a bad habit of wanting to lay our brand of enlightenment on everyone else. Self-righteousness deprives others of their right to find their own answers at their own pace: It is a great gift to respect other people's evolutionary process. Not only is tolerance of differences good for the world, it is beneficial for us as individuals as well. Tolerance enables us to use diversity as a springboard for exploration and learning; it enables us to experience the deeper commonality of our humanness.

In closing, I want to say that I am not meaning for this article to have a "guilt tripping" tone to it. It is certainly true that sometimes a person may have no time or energy for charity work i.e. if your children are young, or you are taking care of an aging parent. In that case, your "charitable contribution to the world" for the time being is to do a great job of being a parent or caretaker. However, when the children are grown, or during retirement, or for people who are not parents, I think charity work is a healthy choice. The world has many, many challenging problems. Ignoring them is not the answer, because that eventually leads to feelings of despair and alienation. If you take the time to figure out what kind of charitable work fires your soul, it will bring a deep sense of purpose and meaning to your life, and help make the world a better place. Charitable giving...pass it on.