

Can Helping Other People Speed Up Brain Injury Recovery?

Every day, each of us participates in dozens of seemingly minor social interactions: from buying our morning coffee to casually passing someone in the hallway. For most of us, these become automatic. For someone recovering from a neuro trauma, there is nothing minor about utilizing social skills in *any* level of communication. At Life Skills Village, we believe in helping our patients redevelop their social skills via education, rehearsal, reintegration and discovering an altruistic purpose in their lives. This purpose can do so much more than provide meaning in our patients' lives – it promotes the neuroplasticity so critical for true rehabilitation.



Neuro trauma or otherwise, altruism makes people happier even than spending money on themselves.[1] "Giving to charity activates [brain regions associated with pleasure](#), social connection, and trust. Scientists also believe that altruism may trigger the release of endorphins in the brain, giving us a '[helper's high](#).'"[2] Perhaps most important for people with a neuro trauma: altruism promotes social connections. "When we give to others, they feel closer to us, and we also feel closer to them. 'Being kind and generous leads you to perceive others more positively and more charitably,' writes psychologist [Sonja Lyubomirsky](#) in her book *The How of Happiness*, and this 'fosters a heightened sense of interdependence and cooperation in your social community.'"[3]

Obviously, this is important for all of us as social beings. But for someone with neuro trauma, these social interactions actually promote neuroplasticity[4], which is the essentially the brain optimizing itself as a result of behavioral change or to accommodate an injury.

Being altruistic doesn't require a big dollar donation or a massive dedication of time and energy. In fact, altruism can be integrated into those "seemingly minor" social interactions mentioned earlier. Below are 47 socially positive, altruistic actions that can be used for developing social skills and uncovering a meaningful purpose in life.5 Integrate several of these into your daily routine and it won't be long before you notice positive differences in your own life - neuro trauma or otherwise.

1. Hold the door open for the person behind you.
2. Donate your old clothes to a charity or directly to someone in need.
(www.salvationarmyusa.org)
3. Inspire others online. (Start a blog or simply post an inspirational meme on your [Facebook](#) page.)
4. Replace what you've used. (Example: If you finish off the pot of coffee at work, brew another for those who will want coffee after you. This goes double for toilet paper!)
5. Shop at your local charity thrift store, where the profits support your community's at-risk populations.
6. Pay for the person in line behind you when you get your morning coffee.
7. Donate old glasses to your local Lenscrafters (www.lenscrafters.com/lc-us/find-a-store) or the OneSight program (www.onesight.org)
8. Create a care package and send it to a soldier overseas.
(www.adoptaussoldier.org/index.php/site/adopt).
9. Instead of asking for birthday gifts, ask friends to donate in your name to a charity. (www.birthdaycharity.com can give you some ideas)
10. Add some change to an expired parking meter so that person's car isn't ticketed.
11. Offer your seat on the bus or subway to someone else when there are none left.
12. Hug a friend. Let them know how important they are to you.
13. Give or loan out books to friends, charities or prison organizations.
(www.betterworldbooks.com/go/donate)
14. Use www.freecycle.org to donate/recycle items you otherwise might throw away.
15. Send an unexpected, complimentary card or email to a friend, saying how much you value them.
16. Donate items to the Humane Society from their online wish list (<http://www.animalhumanesociety.org/donate/donate-our-wish-list>) or donate in person. If you have an hour or two a week to spare, ask about volunteering.
17. When you're ordering take-out or fast food, order an extra meal and give it to a homeless person.
18. Take your neighbor's trash cans back up to their house after the garbage has been collected.
19. Shovel someone else's driveway when it snows. (Or mow their lawn in summer.)
20. Let someone else ahead of you in line.
21. Smile at someone who looks like they could use one. Smiles are contagious and can instantly change someone's bad mood to good – especially when they're unexpected.

22. Help the elderly or disabled with their groceries, other shopping or even cleaning.
23. Tip generously and unexpectedly. Servers depend on tips and good ones are always appreciated. Tip someone unaccustomed to tips (such as your bagger at the grocery store) a dollar or two.
24. Be an equal opportunity listener. Address the shyest person in a group and give them a chance to be heard. Chances are, they've been waiting for this moment for a while.
25. Volunteer at your community garden and get to know your neighbors.
26. Ask your minister/priest/rabbi/imam to pray for someone in need.
27. Sweat for a cause by volunteering or participating in a charity walk/run.
28. Celebrate someone else's courage – someone is always fighting a bigger battle than you. Call, write, post online or offer a toast in person.
29. Utilize social media to promote a non-profit to friends and as a tool to meet new friends online. If you sign an online petition that means something to you, pass it along to friends who may share your opinion.
30. Acknowledge the inspiration you get from someone else when you create something original. Do this in person or post "shout outs" on social media.
31. Express your gratitude when someone makes even the smallest difference in your day and/or life. Saying "Thank you" never goes out of style.
32. Buy coffee and bagels and drop them off at your local fire house. Firemen are on call 24-hours a day for several days at a time and, since they generally cook for themselves, always appreciate something fresh.
33. Thank a member of the Armed Services, a policeman or fireman for their selfless service. Be sure to give them a good firm handshake. No one appreciates a firm handshake like a soldier.(6)
34. Buy 10 lottery tickets and give them away to random people on the street, wishing them good luck as you do.
35. Hide notes of encouragement for people where they will find them.
36. Visit someone who is homebound or ill. Offer to help any way you can – even a short conversation can brighten their day.
37. Take the time and show some interest in the lives of the people you encounter every day – from the clerk at the dry cleaner to your barista.
38. Forgive a debt that someone owes you.
39. Grow your hair long and donate the ponytail to Locks of Love.
40. Bring your co-workers a special treat like homemade brownies.
41. Read a book to a sick child at your local Children's Hospital.
42. Help someone lose weight by becoming their exercise buddy.

43. Be nice to the telemarketer calling you during dinner. Remember: everyone has to make a living.
44. Return a shopping cart for someone at the grocery store. This benefits the person you're doing it for as well as the store employee wrangling carts.
45. Visit a website where your clicks translate into money for a good cause – and you don't have to pay a dime. For a list of these sites, visit: www.nicethingstodo.net/freeclicksites.html
46. Acknowledge the hard work of parents of special needs children by complimenting them on their efforts.
47. Donate old sports equipment to urban kid's and veteran's organizations. (www.fitnessforcharity.org, www.pickupplease.org, or www.bbbs.org (Big Brothers Big Sisters of America)).

In neuro rehab – as in life – every act has significance. Taking altruistic action has countless benefits, but especially to those with a neuro trauma. Even a little fulfillment can lead to exponential enjoyment of life.

Thanks for reading! For more helpful information on traumatic brain injuries, please visit LifeSkillsVillage.com or call 833.TBI.HELP (833.824.4357)



[1] <http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/altruism/definition>

[2] <http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/altruism/definition>

3 <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3491815/>

4 <http://bigthink.com/think-tank/brain-exercise>

5 <http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/altruism/definition>

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