

The *Activism*



New science says doing good actually changes you—physiologically

KATE HANNI, 48, is living proof—with emphasis on *living*—of physician-philosopher Albert Schweitzer’s words: “The only ones among you who will be truly happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.”

On June 21, 2006, Hanni, then a real estate broker in Napa, California, was lured to a million-dollar home by a man who had called her, posing as a home buyer. For 25 minutes after she arrived at the house, he beat and dragged her; he even pulled her hair out. Then he left her on the floor to die. “The skin on my hands and knees was gone,” Hanni says. “But worst of all, so were my dignity and my sense of safety in the world.”

Hanni’s physical injuries healed over time, but the psychic damage she suffered was lasting and profound. “After six months of intensive therapy,” she says, “I was still afraid to be alone. If no one else was at home, I’d have a panic attack when I opened my own front door.”

TROUBLE ON THE TARMAC

Five months later, Hanni decided to take what she hoped would be a “therapeutic vacation” with her family. On December 29, Hanni and her husband, Tim, and sons Landen, then 11, and

Chase, then 21, were en route to Alabama when their American Airlines plane was diverted to Austin. There, it became stranded on the tarmac, leaving the family and their 138 fellow passengers without food, water or working toilets—for nine hours. “Being trapped on that plane intensified the victimized feeling I’d had since the assault,” Hanni recalls. At that moment, she realized she didn’t want to spend the rest of her life feeling powerless. “I thought, enough is enough.”

Two weeks after the flight fiasco, Hanni founded the Coalition for an Airline Passengers’ Bill of Rights and created a Web site for the organization, flyersrights.org. Within months, she quit her job because she was so busy being interviewed by newspapers and national TV outlets.

“When I took on this issue,” Hanni says, “I’d tried everything therapy had to offer, but I was still a prisoner of my fears. Then I was invited to appear on *Good Morning America* in New York, which meant that I would have to fly for the first time since we were stranded. I knew that either I was going to have to face my fears and go or I was going to miss an opportunity to spread the word.

“I went,” she says. “And I forgot to be afraid. Since then, my terror—about the assault as well as about flying—has been gone. Taking on this cause has done me more good than any therapy ever could.”

THE HELPER’S HIGH

Kate Hanni’s experience illustrates what doctors and psychotherapists have long observed, and scientists can now explain. People who give to others give healthier, happier lives to themselves.

Whether a person has experienced a life-altering trauma such as Hanni’s or is grappling with a more ordinary case of anxiety or the blues, research shows that those who take “the activism cure” find personal healing in their efforts to heal the world.

A National Institute on Aging study titled “Americans’ Changing Lives” followed more than 3,600 people from 1986 to 2006. Researchers discovered that volunteers had an advantage over those who didn’t do good works. “People of all ages who did community service were happier and experienced better physical health and less depression,” says study leader Peggy Thoits, PhD, professor of sociology at Indiana University in Bloomington. »

Similarly, Paul Arnstein, RN, PhD, a clinical nurse specialist at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, found that even people with chronic pain could alleviate their suffering by spending time helping others. “As soon as the participants began their training in their chosen programs, they experienced reduced pain and disability, and less depression. When they were polled again after volunteering for several months, the participants reported that their well-being had continued to improve,” he says. Why did the altruistic actions benefit their health? People in the study attributed their improvements to feeling needed, developing new relationships and having a growth experience.

eat or have sex. It’s clear that helping others, even if it is just volunteering for several hours every week, makes people’s moods improve.”

THE CONTROL FACTOR

If you or anyone you know has ever gone through a hard time—in other words, if you or anyone you know is human—you’ve undoubtedly observed that people respond as differently to adversity as they do to flavors of ice cream. Some sail through with confident, optimistic flags unfurled. Others facing a similar situation spend weeks, months or years flailing in the quicksand of despair.

Experts call this variable the resilience factor. Endless research dollars

for charitable donations and citizen action instead of for pills and psychotherapy. But for now, women keep discovering the activism cure on their own. Laura Dean-Mooney, now 48, lost her husband Mike to a drunk driver and dealt with the pain by joining Mothers Against Drunk Driving and telling her story to offenders in DUI programs. “One offender told me he’d never start his car again without thinking of Mike and me, and he vowed he’d never drive drunk again,” recalls the Orlando, Florida, resident. “I feel that I have a mission in life.”

After she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2000 at age 58, Karen Gleason of Orinda, California, found just the medicine she needed: She decided



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THE ANATOMY OF CHARITY

Recently scientists have discovered a physiological basis for the warm glow that often seems to accompany giving. “Scans show that the brain structures that are activated when you get a reward are the same ones that are activated when you give. In fact, they’re activated more,” says Jordan Grafman, PhD, chief of the cognitive neuroscience section of the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke.

“That activation releases feel-good chemicals, triggering a surge of physical energy,” notes bioethicist Stephen G. Post, PhD, coauthor of *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*. Chief among those chemicals is dopamine, the neurotransmitter that reinforces the human tendency to do whatever makes us feel great.

“When we do good deeds, we’re rewarded by a dopamine pulse,” Post says. “Giving a donation or volunteering in a food bank tweaks the same pleasure source that lights up when we

have been spent attempting to unlock its mysteries, in hopes of allowing more of us to sail and fewer of us to get stuck in the muck. It’s still not clear what combination of genetics, upbringing and circumstance makes one person more resilient than the next. But most experts agree that you can handle setbacks better and reduce your image of yourself as a victim if you work to increase your sense of control over your life, which is what the activism cure provides. “You recover faster when you feel needed and competent,” says Jerilyn Ross, president and CEO of the Anxiety Disorders Association of America and author of the forthcoming book *One Less Thing to Worry About*.

What’s more, “When we give back, it shifts the focus outside ourselves,” Ross says. “Doing things for other people, thinking about other people, is like giving your brain a break from despair.”

A NEW APPROACH?

Maybe one day, physicians and psychiatrists will write prescriptions

to create Friends of Ruwenzori, a fund-raising program for HIV/AIDS initiatives in Uganda.

“I believe that my immune system got stronger because I had emotional health,” Gleason says. “And for me, emotional health comes from feeling like I’m needed and being part of a group of like-minded people.”

She adds, “When I start to worry about my health or anything else, I just focus on the joy I get from knowing I’m making a real difference. That is what feeds me.”

Today, Kate Hanni calls herself a poster child for the activism cure. Once crippled by her trauma, she’s now the spokesperson for a national movement. In 2008, she was named one of the nation’s 25 Most Influential Executive Women in Travel by *Forbes*. “This cause gave me a purpose for living that’s so exciting. I wake up and jump out of bed to get started every day. I’ve never felt better,” she says. “And it wouldn’t have happened if it weren’t for the horrifying events of two years ago.” 🍌