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Volunteering in middle age and senior years linked to enhanced mental health

No positive association seen before age of 40, suggesting link varies across life course

Volunteering in middle and older age is linked to good mental health/emotional wellbeing, finds a large study of British adults, published in the online journal **BMJ Open**.

But no such association was seen before the age of 40, suggesting that the link may be stronger at certain points of the life course, say the researchers.

Previous research has shown that volunteering in older age is associated with better mental and physical health, but it's unclear whether this extends to other age groups.

The researchers therefore mined responses to the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), involving a representative sample of adults living in 5000 households in Great Britain.

The BHPS ran every year from 1991 until 2008 before being incorporated into a much larger survey. It included a wide range of questions on leisure time activities, which covered the frequency of formal volunteering—from at least once a week through to once a year or less, or never.

The BHPS also included a validated proxy for mental health/emotional wellbeing known as the GHQ-12.

The researchers gathered 66,343 responses for 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006 and 2008.

Around one in five respondents (21%) said they had volunteered. Women tended to volunteer more than men, and while almost a quarter of those aged 60 to 74 said they volunteered, this proportion dropped to 17% among the youngest age group.

GHQ-12 scores were better (lower) among those who volunteered than among those who had never done so—10.7 vs 11.4—across the entire sample, irrespective of age.

The average GHQ score was the best (lowest) among those who were frequent volunteers and worst (highest) among those who never volunteered.

When age was factored in, the positive association between volunteering and good mental health/emotional wellbeing became apparent at around the age of 40 and continued up into old age (80+).

Those who had never volunteered had lower levels of emotional wellbeing, starting at midlife and continuing into old age, compared with those who did volunteer.

The findings held true even after taking account of a range of potentially influential factors, including marital status, educational attainment, social class, and state of health.

By way of an explanation for the findings, the researchers speculate that volunteering at younger ages may just be viewed as another obligation, while social roles and family connections in early middle age may spur people to become involved in community activities, such as in their child's school.

This is an observational study so no firm conclusions can be drawn about cause and effect, added to which the researchers were not able to gauge the extent of 'informal' volunteering, such as helping out neighbours, so couldn't capture the full spectrum of voluntary activities.

But they nevertheless suggest that the findings show that volunteering may be more meaningful at certain points of the life course, and they call for greater efforts to involve middle aged to older people in some sort of volunteering.

“Volunteering might provide those groups with greater opportunities for beneficial activities and social contacts, which in turn may have protective effects on health status...With the ageing of the population, it is imperative to develop effective health promotion for this last third of life, so that those living longer are healthier,” they write.

Previous research indicates that people who volunteer are likely to have more resources, a larger social network, and more power and prestige, all of which have knock-on effects on physical and mental health, they point out.

“Volunteering may also provide a sense of purpose, particularly for those people who have lost their earnings, because regular volunteering helps maintain social networks, which are especially important for older people who are often socially isolated,” they add.

[Ends]

Notes for editors:

Research: Association of volunteering with mental well-being: a life course analysis of a national population based longitudinal study in the UK.

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