

Research Finds Volunteering Can Be Good for Your Health

Data show cognitive benefits with as little as 2 to 2-1/2 hours of volunteering each week, on average



Teaching photography is one volunteering job for Paul Diamond, who says his volunteering efforts keep him in a “nice routine.” PHOTO: HEALTH ADVOCATES FOR OLDER PEOPLE

If it is Monday, you’ll find Paul Diamond in New York teaching photography to seniors. On Tuesdays he’s coaching small-business owners through a nonprofit. Other days, he

helps in a photography class, mentors teens, visits homebound seniors and volunteers at a Harlem jazz museum.

Mr. Diamond, 73, worked six days a week in the bridal-gown business before retiring in 2009. He sees the 15 to 20 hours he now volunteers each week as necessary. “You have to interact with people,” he says, “or your brain really dries up.”

His attitude tracks with emerging science about the health impacts of volunteering. A recent [study](#) of 2,705 volunteers age 18 and older from UnitedHealthcare and VolunteerMatch found that 75% of those who volunteered in the past 12 months said volunteering made them feel physically healthier.

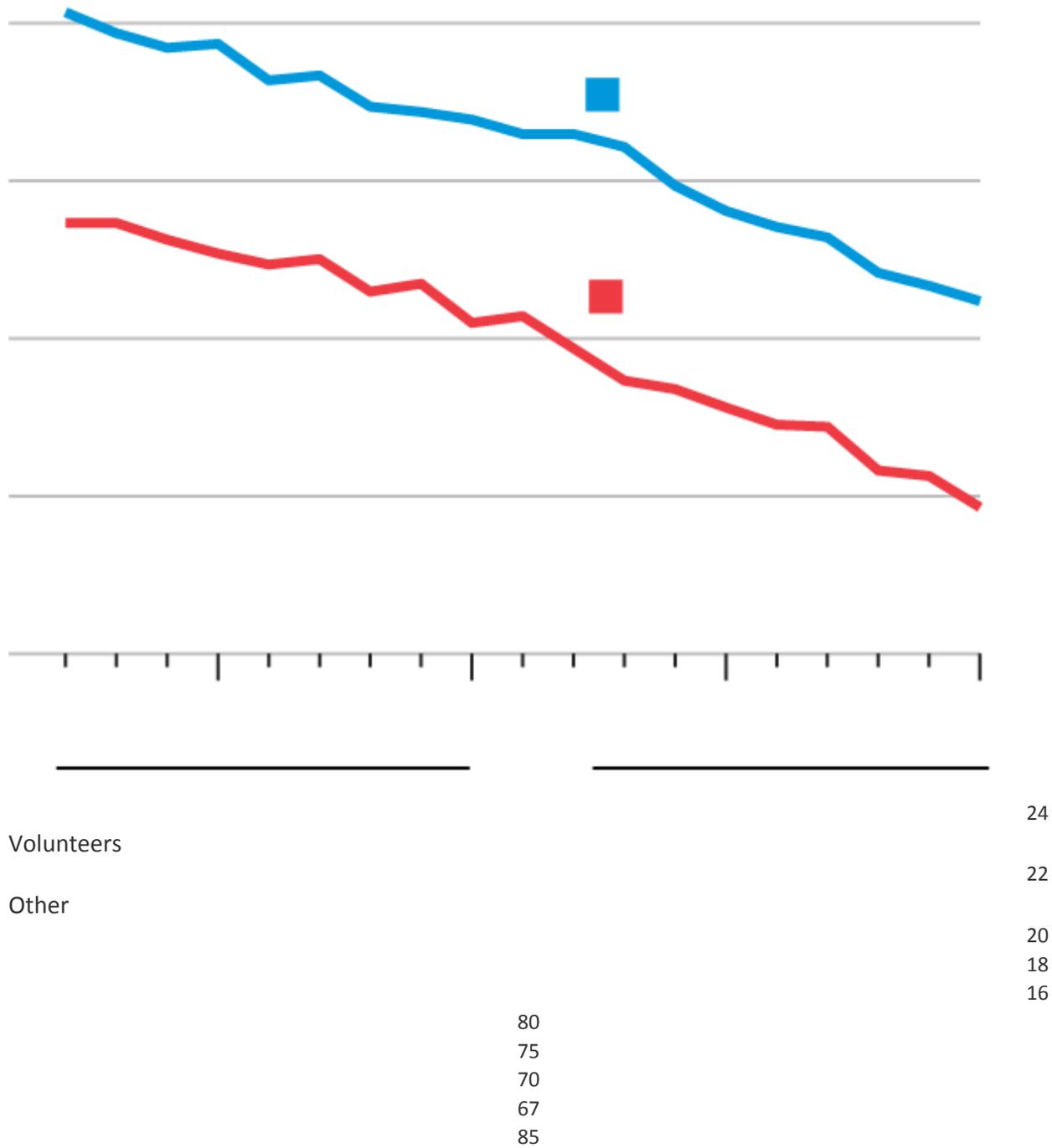
Slowing decline

A much larger [study](#)—one involving more than 64,000 subjects age 60 and older from 1998 to 2010—has found results suggesting that volunteering slows the cognitive decline of aging.

The author of that study, Sumedha Gupta, an assistant economics professor at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, used data from the long-running University of Michigan Health and Retirement [Study](#) to reach her conclusions. After dividing respondents into three categories—volunteers, nonvolunteers and individuals who switched back and forth—she found that an individual who is volunteering 100 hours a year scores on average about 6% higher in cognitive testing than a nonvolunteer. “The effect is significant. It’s consistent,” Dr. Gupta says.

High-Scoring Volunteers

As people age, their cognitive scores drop, but those who volunteer score higher at every age



AGE

Source: Health and Retirement Study, 1998-2010,

University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research

The study's methodology controlled for variables such as a person's initial health and took into account external influences that would force subjects to reduce their

volunteering hours. Dr. Gupta also was careful to treat as separate issues the subjects' emotional well-being and presence of depression.

“If you keep everything else constant by putting in all these controls and following this individual over time,” she says, “we find that as people volunteer, their cognitive health scores improve. If they don't volunteer, their cognitive scores decline faster.”

The reasons behind volunteering's boost to cognitive health, Dr. Gupta says, have to do with the unique characteristics of such activity.

For starters, unlike paid work, there is a “different subjective well-being” or “warm glow” that a volunteer experiences from helping people. Volunteering is also unique “because it supplies mental, physical and social stimulation in one package,” Dr. Gupta says. “You have to move around, you interact with people, you think about activities.” Whereas doing a Sudoku puzzle offers one type of intellectual stimulation, she says, volunteers get all of these types of stimulation simultaneously.

More is better

Dr. Gupta's advice to seniors is that if they're well enough, they should consider volunteering, and if they're already volunteering, they should consider devoting more time each week. The data showed cognitive benefits with as little as 2 to 2½ hours of volunteering each week, on average, she says.

Mr. Diamond says his volunteering schedule keeps him in a “nice routine.”

His only clear weekday is Thursdays, on which he recently decided to begin taking saxophone lessons.

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<https://www.wsj.com/articles/research-finds-volunteering-can-be-good-for-your-health-1524449280>