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*...from the
director's chair*

Pay it forward

I just got back from the Bramasole Diner, the all-day-breakfast greasy spoon where I've been a regular for over 17 years. On a typical Sunday, it was hot and crowded and noisy; the guy beside me at the counter kept bumping his sweaty elbow into me and a woman a few tables away was loudly berating the long-suffering server for putting too much ice in her glass of water (I kid you not).

I should have been annoyed and grumpy, but instead I felt like a million bucks. The cafe owner, Karen, had just told me about the delightful reaction of the customer whose breakfast I had paid for the day before.

Karen and I have had this thing going for years; it started when I did her a small favor and she repaid me with a free breakfast. When she refused to let me pay the second time, I suggested that I pay for someone else's breakfast. When we saw that customer do a double-take and then grin from ear to ear, we were hooked. Now, whenever Karen is my server, I pick up the tab for another table, she hands that customer a zero-balance bill on which I've written "pay it forward" and we all have just a little bit nicer day.

And here's the bonus: apart from the obvious benefit of helping others, giving is one of the most therapeutic things we can do for ourselves. Numerous studies examine the ways that giving is good for the giver, citing increased self-esteem, less depression, lower stress levels, greater happiness, lower blood pressure, and longer life, among the benefits associated with acts of kindness.

Some even argue that charitable behavior generates as much in the way of health benefits as diet and physical activity.

The lottery-winning jolt I felt this morning was more than psychological. Research has shown that kind or generous behavior triggers the secretion of natural "happy" chemicals in our brains, such as mood-mediating serotonin, dopamine, a feel-good chemical, and a compassion and bonding substance known as oxytocin (not to be confused with OxyContin, one of several commercial names for oxycodone, an opioid painkiller).

Oxytocin also causes the release of a chemical called nitric oxide, which expands the blood vessels. This reduces blood pressure making oxytocin a "cardio-protective" hormone which protects the heart by lowering blood pressure.

And forget the anti-wrinkle cream. Two culprits that speed up the chemical process of aging in the human body are free radicals and inflammation, but new research shows that oxytocin reduces levels of both these in the cardiovascular system, thus slowing aging at its source. So, kindness is good for you inside and out.

And, according to a University of California Berkeley study, people who volunteered for two or more organizations were 44% less likely to die over a five-year period than those who didn't volunteer, even accounting for many other factors including age, exercise, general health and negative habits like smoking. Good news for truck drivers!

And here's the thing: any kind of giving can boost your wellness. It doesn't need to be an organized volunteer activity, or cutting a cheque for a worthy cause. Those small, random acts of kindness can have the same impact: paying for the coffee of the person behind you or tipping a little



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more than usual; holding the door or the elevator for someone; mowing a neighbor's lawn or shoveling their driveway; leaving coins on a vending machine or at the laundromat for the next customer; or donating used clothes to a shelter.

The gift of giving and unselfishness stimulates the reward center in the brain, releasing endorphins and creating what is known as the "helper's high." And like other highs, this one is addictive, too. Generosity can be contagious, spurring a ripple effect and keeping the cycle of "good" going.

That's what my "pay it forward" deal at the Bramasole is all about. When a customer realizes I'm the person who bought their breakfast and comes to thank me, I just ask them to do something nice for someone else. And they usually do. The servers delight in sharing the stories of how others pay for meals, write thank you notes on napkins for the cook, or add money to a customer's parking meter.

In this clamorous, overcrowded, and sometimes nasty world we live in, generosity trumps apathy every time. Pay that one forward.

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