

LIVE
MORE

Happy

SERVICE

Dr Darren Morton

Happy Samaritans

The best lessons we can learn from children are life lessons on how to live better. When my children were 10, nine and seven years old, my wife and I took them to Sydney to see the sights. In the early evening, we went for a walk through the heart of the bustling city. As we turned a corner, we were confronted by a homeless man who was on his knees, cradling a plastic cup, hoping for a handout.

My immediate reaction was to veer to the opposite side of the footpath and I tugged at the hands of the two children I was leading. But, instead of following my lead, I felt a tug from my youngest, Caleb, in the opposite direction. To my alarm, I felt his hand slip from mine and, as I turned my head, I saw him move quickly toward the man.

Caleb looked up at me and said, “We have to help him, Daddy. Do you have some money?”

Ashamedly, my first thought was that, if I put money into the man’s empty cup, I would simply be funding his next pack of cigarettes or bottle of alcohol. But in that moment, I also had an acute awareness that there was a greater lesson here. I reached into my pocket and handed Caleb some cash, which he placed in the man’s cup. That day, Caleb was the teacher—and I was the student.

Scientists from several fields are converging on the fact that we humans seem to be wired to look out for others. In a fascinating article titled “The Samaritan Paradox”—published in *Scientific America Mind*—the authors concluded, “Our species is apparently the only one with a genetic makeup that promotes selflessness and true altruistic behaviour.” Something deep within us seems to embrace the paradox that, through giving, we receive. Through service, our spirits are lifted.

Many studies testify to this. For example, studies show that volunteering time to a worthwhile cause increases wellbeing, health and possibly even life span. A large study in the United States indicated that volunteering once per week increased peoples’ chances of being “very happy” with their lives by the same amount as moving from a personal income bracket of less than \$20,000 per year, which is below the poverty line, to more than \$75,000 per year. Put another way, volunteering once per week can offer the same emotional lift as tripling our income!

Researchers from the University of North Carolina have even found that having an altruistic orientation helps boost our immune system. The study compared people who reported two different kinds of wellbeing. “Hedonic wellbeing” is characterised

by having lots of positive psychological experiences, typically through self-gratification. In contrast, “eudaimonic wellbeing” results from striving for meaning and a noble purpose, often with a spirit of service. The researchers found that only people with high levels of “eudaimonic wellbeing” had boosted immune systems.

Serving changes the direction of our focus from inward to outward. It gets us outside our self, and this seems to help our brain. Perhaps as we see the plight of others, we realise that ours might not be so bad after all, so we become better at looking to the positive. Perhaps by serving others, we create new social bonds, so become immersed in an uplifting social environment. Perhaps in the act of serving, we are forced to speak positively or even move dynamically. Whatever the reason, serving lifts our mood and lifts us.

In considering all the studies that have been done on how to boost emotional wellbeing, former president of the American Psychological Association and widely regarded as the father of the “positive psychology movement,” Martin Seligman concluded, “We scientists have found that doing a kindness produces the single most reliable increase in wellbeing (happiness) of any exercise we have tested.”

Approaching life with an attitude of service is not

only honourable, it is one of the best things we can do for ourselves. Service has even been described as “enlightened self-interest”—as compared to “self-sacrifice”—because the rewards that come from it do the doer such good. The “helper’s high” is a real and enduring buzz.

In many ways, it is “more blessed to give than receive.” But, while the evidence for the benefits of service is overwhelming, there are also pitfalls to be avoided. It is important that we learn how to serve *smart*.

Serve sincerely

One of my favourite quotes to live by reads as follows: “Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that. Don’t be impressed with yourself. Don’t compare yourself to others. Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life.” I love this quote for many reasons and I have it on my office door, so all visitors can benefit from its wisdom.

I have learned that, as my favourite quote concludes, all we need to concern ourselves with is doing the creative best we can with our own lives. Keep your eyes fixed on your authentic contribution. Yes, learn from others and let them help you be your

best, but don't make it a competition that can lead to discouragement or pride. So concentrate on the work you have been given to do, and do it to the very best of *your* ability.

Serve with your signature strengths

Much has been written and researched about "signature strengths." One thing is certain: we are all different in our profile of strengths. Researchers have identified 24 signature strengths that grow out of six virtues. To discover your signature strengths, take the signature strengths test at www.viacharacter.org/survey/.

An increasing number of studies are showing that intentionally using our "signature strengths" is associated with higher levels of happiness and less depression. One study found that how we use our signature strengths on one day affects our mood the next.

While using our signature strengths can elevate us, using our signature strengths for good can lift us higher. As have many others, I have come to discover that the sweet spot in life is where what we love, what we are good at and what serves the world all intersect. We will be most emotionally uplifted if we use our signature strengths for

service. As suggested in the earlier quotation, “make a careful exploration of who you are” to discover them, then use them for good.

Putting it into action

1. Become a RAKtivist.

Make a habit of doing Random Acts of Kindness. For some great and simple ideas on how to become a “RAKtivist,” visit the Random Acts of Kindness website: <www.randomactsofkindness.org>.

2. Use your signature strengths in a new way for good.

Make a careful exploration of who you are by identifying your signature strengths. What comes easily to you? What are you passionate about? What strengths do others see in you? Discover what they are and get creative about ways you can activate them for good, then do it!

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Find more scientifically proven ways to **lift your mood** and **your life** in Dr Darren Morton's book, *Live More Happy*.



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