

SELFLESSNESS CHALLENGE

OCTOBER

numan

Acts of Selflessness

Selflessness might sound like a vague wellness buzzword, but research shows it has real, measurable health benefits.

Acts of kindness, whether directed at others or yourself, change your body chemistry.^{1,2} They lower stress hormones, improve heart health, and even increase life expectancy. At the same time, neglecting connection or compassion can raise risks of anxiety, depression, and chronic illness.



Why Kindness Matters

Kindness isn’t just a moral virtue, but a measurable health intervention.²

Researchers are finding that the simple act of helping others, or even building stronger social ties, has effects similar to certain treatments.² From lowering blood pressure to extending healthspan, the science shows that being kind can rewire both body and brain in profound ways:^{2,3}

Cardiovascular Health
Helping others is associated with lower blood pressure and a reduced risk of heart disease.²

Longevity
Strong social ties, common in Blue Zone communities where people can live past 100, can add up to 3 months of life.⁵

Stress
People who regularly perform kind acts have up to 23% lower cortisol levels, the hormone linked with stress and anxiety.⁴

Mental health
Acts of kindness activate the brain’s reward system, boosting serotonin and endorphins, which are natural chemicals that lift mood.⁶

Put simply: kindness isn’t “feel-good fluff”. **It’s preventative health care.**

¹ Buettner D, Skemp S. Blue Zones: Lessons from the world’s longest lived: Lessons from the world’s longest lived. Am J Lifestyle Med. 2016;10(5):318–21

² Martino J, Pegg J, Frates EP. The connection prescription: Using the power of social interactions and the deep desire for connectedness to empower health and wellness. Am J Lifestyle Med. 2017;11(6):466–75.

³ Song CF, Tay PKC, Gwee X, Wee SL, Ng TP. Happy people live longer because they are healthy people. BMC Geriatr. 2023;23(1):440.

⁴ McCraty R, Barrios–Choplin B, Rozman D, Atkinson M, Watkins AD. The impact of a new emotional self–management program on stress, emotions, heart rate variability, DHEA and cortisol. Integr Physiol Behav Sci. 1998;33(2):151–70.

⁵ Bhatia R, Hirsch C, Arnold AM, Newman AB, Mukamal KJ. Social networks, social support, and life expectancy in older adults: the Cardiovascular Health Study. Arch Gerontol Geriatr. 2023;111(104981):104981.

⁶ Fryburg DA. Kindness as a stress reduction–health promotion intervention: A review of the psychobiology of caring. Am J Lifestyle Med. 2022;16(1):89–100.

Your October Selflessness Challenge

This October, the challenge is to put selflessness into practice in ways proven to support both your mental and physical health. Grounded in evidence from clinical research and long-lived populations like the Blue Zones (regions where people live exceptionally long lives), these weekly steps show how small acts of kindness can translate into big health outcomes.¹

Over the next 30 days, we'll focus on four key areas:

- Start with kindness to yourself.
- Build small connections.
- Contribute to your community.
- Strengthen group ties.

WEEK 1

Start with you



Selflessness begins with sustainability. Research shows people who practise consistent self-care are more resilient to stress, less prone to burnout, and better able to support others.⁷ In healthcare, this principle shows that carers who neglect their own wellbeing are more likely to experience depression and chronic illness themselves.⁸

This week is about building your own baseline of health

- PRIORITISE SLEEP**

Studies show 7–9 hours is essential for regulating mood and lowering blood pressure. Anything less increases cortisol and inflammation.⁹
- SET A “RECOVERY WINDOW”**

Whether it’s a 30-minute walk, stretching, or simply putting your phone away, short bouts of recovery time have been proven to reduce anxiety.¹⁰
- FUEL PROPERLY**

Skipping meals or relying on processed snacks spikes and crashes blood sugar, worsening stress. Focus on balanced, fibre-rich meals that stabilise energy.¹¹

Think of self-care as preventative medicine.
Without it, acts of kindness for others are harder to sustain.

⁷ Torres-Soto NY, Corral-Verdugo V, Corral-Frías NS. The relationship between self-care, positive family environment, and human wellbeing. Wellbeing Space Soc. 2022;3(100076):100076.

⁸ Michael K, Schujovitzky D, Karnieli-Miller O. The associations between resilience, self-care, and burnout among medical students. PLoS One. 2024;19(9):e0309994.

⁹ Shah AS, Pant MR, Bommasamudram T, Nayak KR, Roberts SSH, Gallagher C, et al. Effects of sleep deprivation on physical and mental health outcomes: An umbrella review. Am J Lifestyle Med. 2025;15598276251346752.

¹⁰ Edwards MK, Rosenbaum S, Loprinzi PD. Differential experimental effects of a short bout of walking, meditation, or combination of walking and meditation on state anxiety among young adults.

¹¹ Am J Health Promot. 2018;32(4):949–58.

WEEK 2

Build Small Connections



Human beings are hardwired for connection. Research has found that loneliness increases the risk of early death as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.¹² By contrast, even light social contact, such as a chat with a neighbour or a phone call to a friend, measurably improves health markers like blood pressure and heart rate variability.

¹². Kidambi N, Lee EE. Insight into potential mechanisms linking loneliness and cognitive decline: Commentary on ‘health factors as potential mediator the longitudinal effect of loneliness on general cognitive ability’. Am J Geriatr Psychiatry. 2020;28(12):1284–6.

¹³. Carter CS. Oxytocin pathways and the evolution of human behavior. Annu Rev Psychol. 2014;65(1):17–39.

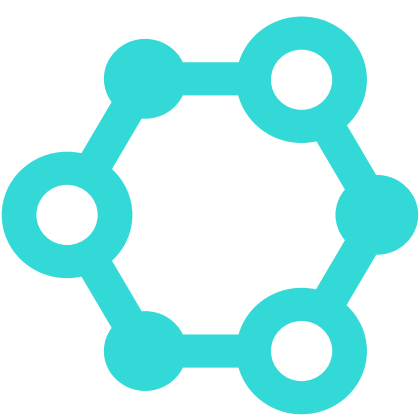
Your challenge this week

- REPLACE ONE TEXT WITH A CALL**
Voice-to-voice contact activates empathy circuits in the brain more strongly than written words.
- TALK TO SOMEONE NEW**
Even short, casual conversations with strangers increase oxytocin, the hormone linked to trust and bonding.
- CHECK IN WITH ONE PERSON DAILY**
Regular contact, even a two-minute conversation, builds the kind of social scaffolding that protects long-term health.¹³

We’re not tasking you with becoming an extrovert. It’s about recognising that social connection is as important to health as nutrition or exercise.

WEEK 3

Contribute to your Community



Community contribution, whether through time, skills, or resources, has been shown to reduce depression rates, lower stress, and improve overall wellbeing. Older volunteers, for example, report up to a 24% lower risk of early death compared with non-volunteers.¹⁴

¹⁴ Okun MA, Yeung EW, Brown S. Volunteering by older adults and risk of mortality: a meta-analysis. Psychol Aging. 2013;28(2):564–77.

¹⁵ Aknin LB, Dunn EW, Proulx J, Lok I, Norton MI. Does spending money on others promote happiness?: A registered replication report. J Pers Soc Psychol. 2020;119(2):e15–26.

Your focus this week



GIVE TIME

Just one to two hours of volunteering a week at a food bank, charity shop, or local project produces measurable psychological benefits.

OFFER YOUR SKILLS

Whether it’s tutoring, DIY, or professional expertise, using your strengths for others creates a unique sense of purpose.

DONATE WHAT YOU DON’T NEED

Passing on clothes, books, or tools is a simple way to participate. Research shows that “prosocial spending” (spending on others) increases happiness more than spending on ourselves.¹⁵

Consistency is key. The benefits are not from one-off gestures but from regular patterns of contribution.

WEEK 4

Strengthen Group Ties



One of the most valuable lessons from Blue Zones is the power of strong social groups. These networks act as long-term buffers against stress, promoting shared habits like daily activity and balanced eating.¹

¹⁶ Santini ZI, Jose PE, Koyanagi A, Meilstrup C, Nielsen L, Madsen KR, et al. Formal social participation protects physical health through enhanced mental health: A longitudinal mediation analysis using three consecutive waves of the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE). Soc Sci Med. 2020;251(112906):112906.

This week, the challenge is to invest in group connection

ORGANISE ONE COLLECTIVE ACTIVITY
It could be a walk, a shared meal, or even a group workout. Research shows group-based exercise leads to better adherence and higher reported wellbeing than exercising alone.¹⁶

COMMIT TO YOUR CIRCLES
If you're part of a sports club, choir, or professional group, attend this week. Long-term participation in structured groups predicts both longevity and mental health.¹⁶

BUILD MICRO-RITUALS
Regular Friday dinners with family, a weekly coffee with a friend, or monthly meet-ups are protective anchors against life's unpredictability.

Social scaffolding is medicine, which helps improve quality of life along the way.

Selflessness is often framed as a virtue.

The science shows it's also a health strategy.

By looking after yourself, connecting with others, contributing to your community, and strengthening your groups, you can reduce stress, protect your heart, and even extend your lifespan.

This October, the challenge isn't about slogans or "feel-good" moments. It's about embedding evidence-based habits that reshape your biology. Acts of kindness can be measurable interventions for long-term health.





numan