

# Being a volunteer can boost mental health

## CHRISTMAS CAMPAIGN

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VOLUNTEERING can significantly boost mental health and well-being in the middle aged and the elderly, a study found.

Mental and emotional well-being was best among those who were frequent volunteers and worst in those who never offered their help.

Researchers at Southampton and Birmingham universities questioned individuals from 5,000 households across the UK. Those who volunteered regularly scored an average of 6 per cent higher on wellbeing tests across every age group.

But when they broke the results down into different age groups they discovered the association between volunteering and well-being only became apparent in those over 40.

Lead author Dr Faiza Tabassum, of Southampton Statistical Sciences Research Institute, said the findings showed it could help older adults to live longer and healthier lives.

She told the Mail: 'There are numerous beneficial effects of volunteering on mental well-being such as having a larger social network, more power and prestige and this in turn leads to better physical and mental health.'

'Volunteering may also provide a sense of purpose, particularly for those people who have lost their earnings, because it regularly helps contribute to the maintenance of social networks and this is especially in case of older people who often live in isolation. Particularly, 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.'

'Signing up the Daily Mail's volunteering campaign might provide those groups with greater opportunities for beneficial activities and social contacts, which in turn may have protective effects on health status.'

The findings should come as good news to thousands of volunteers who have already pledged their time to the Daily Mail's campaign this Christmas.

So far 27,413 people have pledged a combined total of 1,551,528 hours to the NHS over six months. Of these, 15,685 people have pledged three hours a week, while 11,728 have pledged one day a month.

The campaign has been backed by health leaders, unions, celebrities and the Prime Minister. TV presenters Claudia Winkleman and Kate Garraway have both stepped in to help at London hospitals.

The researchers based their analysis on the British Household Panel Survey, which ran every year from 1991 until 2008, before being incorporated into a much larger survey. Around one in five participants 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 per cent among the youngest age group.

The positive link between volunteering and mental health became apparent at around the age of 40 and peaked between the ages of 76 to 80, where those who gave their time to help others experienced a 12 per cent boost to mental health.