Volunteering: A Formula for Health and Happiness

Volunteers are in the news for actively working in communities hard-hit by natural disasters and political unrest. We have seen so many amazing examples of the impact that volunteers can make, and it’s worth learning more about what that impact looks like for ourselves and in our communities.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics tells us that a quarter of Americans volunteered through an organization in 2015, the last time BLS conducted a comprehensive study. In the Dallas-Fort Worth market, where I live, we have a slightly higher volunteer rate at 27.5%. The American city with the highest volunteer rate is Minneapolis at 37.1% and the lowest is Miami/Fort Lauderdale at 13.4%.

So why should we care? There are a couple of important reasons. First, there are not enough paid staff to address all the needs of our communities. Second, the well-being of people is positively impacted when they volunteer. In other words, we all win. It’s as simple as that.

As volunteers, what do we get out of it? I began to think more about this after organizing a volunteer day at a local food pantry for my Toastmasters group several years ago. There were three leadership skills that stood out to me after this experience. The first is flexibility, a skill that serves volunteers and leaders well. When you volunteer, the supplies, the number of people who are there to help out and the funding can all change rapidly, though the mission remains the same. The second leadership skill that shows up in volunteering is problem-solving. I found in an elementary school where I volunteered required a lot of problem-solving just to be able to help the kids with math that didn’t look like any math I learned at their age. Finally, our ability to take initiative grows when we volunteer. Seeing what is needed in the moment and acting on that need is essential as a volunteer and as a leader.

Additionally, there is research that suggests volunteering is good for us in other ways. In a paper published by Harvard Health, authors noted that volunteers benefit from something they call the “happiness effect.” It turns out that weekly volunteering leads to happiness levels comparable to a life-changing salary boost.

This same Harvard Health paper also points out that, ultimately, volunteering helps the community. When people work together in a volunteer capacity they begin to build social connections based on shared values, all of which work in favor of a stronger, more connected community.

With so many benefits resulting from volunteering, the obvious question is, “Why don’t more people engage in volunteerism?” PTO Today suggests that it is, at least in part, because the volunteer opportunity does not speak to what they value. “Giving back” may not be meaningful to someone. But, meeting new people or getting to hang out in the art museum every Saturday may offer a valuable enough experience to entice participation. Linking volunteer opportunities to what you value is a great motivator.

Volunteering is the right thing to do for so many reasons: for your community, for your health, for your leadership development. Search online or in your community for service opportunities that suit your schedule and values. In spite of the stress of life and the lack of time — or maybe because of it — get out there and volunteer. Do good, feel happier, build relationships, learn new skills and have an impact on something important to you.

Source: Kathleen Taylor-Gadsby of Forbes Magazine
Healthy Cooking: Sheet Pan Chicken Tinga Bowls

Ingredients:
1 lb. boneless, skinless chicken thighs
3 bell peppers, sliced (any color)
1 tsp. salt
Pepper to taste
1-2 tbsp. olive oil

For the Tinga Sauce:
1 tbsp. olive oil
Half an onion, chopped
2 cloves garlic, chopped
1-2 chipotle peppers in adobo sauce, chopped
1 tsp. dried oregano
1 tsp. ground cumin
1 14-oz can of crushed, fire-roasted tomatoes
1/2 tsp. salt

Directions:
1. Preheat the oven to 425 degrees. Pat the chicken dry with paper towels. Arrange chicken and peppers on a baking sheet. Toss with olive oil and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Roast for 30 minutes or until the chicken is cooked through.
2. Sauce: While the chicken is baking, heat olive oil in a skillet. Add onion, garlic, chipotles, and spices. Sauté for about 10 minutes. Add tomatoes and salt. Simmer for another 10 minutes. Transfer to a blender and blend until smooth.
3. Remove sheet pan from the oven. Shred the chicken and toss with the sauce.
4. Serve chicken and peppers with quinoa, rice, cauliflower rice, beans, tortillas, greens, etc. Enjoy!

Educational Corner: The Health Benefits of Laughter

Research has shown that the health benefits of laughter are far-ranging. Studies so far have shown that laughter can help relieve pain, bring greater happiness, and even increase immunity. Positive psychology names sense of humor as one of the 24 main signature strengths one can possess.

Unfortunately, however, many people don’t get enough laughter in their lives. In fact, one study suggests that healthy children may laugh as much as 400 times per day, but adults tend to laugh only 15 times per day. Virtually all of us could use a little more laughter in our lives, considering how beneficial a good laugh can be for our stress and overall wellness.

Benefits of Laughter:
- **Hormones:** Laughter reduces the level of stress hormones like cortisol, epinephrine, dopamine, and growth hormone. Laughter increases the number of antibody-producing cells we have working for us and enhances the effectiveness of T cells. All this means a stronger immune system.
- **Physical release:** Have you ever felt like you have to laugh or you’ll cry? Have you experienced that cleansed feeling after a good laugh? Laughter provides a physical and emotional release.
- **Distraction:** Laughter brings the focus away from anger, guilt, stress, and negative emotions in a more beneficial way than other mere distractions.
- **Perspective:** Studies show that our response to stressful events can be altered by whether we view something as a threat or a challenge. Humor can give us a more light-hearted perspective and help us view events as challenges, thereby making them less threatening and more positive.
- **Social benefits:** Laughter connects us with others. Just as with smiling and kindness, most people find that laughter is contagious. So, if you bring more laughter into your life, you can most likely help others around you to laugh more and realize these benefits as well. Even more!

Source: VeryWellMind
8 Easy Ways to Get Started with Exercise This Spring

Spring is finally here! Everything seems to awaken and refresh in the spring. And it’s the perfect time to think about spring cleaning for our bodies, too. If you’ve been hibernating all winter, it’s time to get outside, stretch your legs and start to exercise again.

Spring also means that summer fashion and activities aren’t far away. Exercise helps you look and feel your best. If you haven’t been working out, now is the perfect time to start.

Here are 10 easy tips to help you spring into fitness with success:

**FIND YOUR “WHY”**
It’s important to focus on your true goal. Your ability to stick with exercise and a healthy lifestyle depends on your motivation. You may want to lose weight, but why? So that you will have more energy? To reverse diabetes or high blood pressure? To be there in the future for your family? To feel more confident and comfortable in your body? Your true “why” will help you keep going. Write down your goals and keep them somewhere visible.

**START SMALL**
If you aren’t accustomed to exercising, it’s difficult to stay committed to an hour a day if you aren’t yet conditioned for that. You might start by walking for 15 to 20 minutes a day, 3-4 days a week, and gradually work your way up to more. Even 10 minutes is better than nothing. Easing into exercise can also help you remain injury-free.

**SCHEDULE IT**
Set an exercise time that works for you, and whether that’s morning, noon or night – be consistent with it. Stick to it. Schedule it, like it’s an important meeting. It needs to have that kind of priority in your day so that you will get it done.

**BUILD IN MOVEMENT THROUGHOUT YOUR DAY**
Find little ways to get some exercise during the day. You might do this by having a walking meeting instead of in the conference room; making all calls mobile so that you can take a stroll or do lunges while on the phone; taking the stairs instead of the elevator; walking the dog; or standing or walking around rather than sitting while your child is at soccer practice.

**TAKE IT OUTDOORS**
Take advantage of the spring season to enjoy outdoor exercise among beautiful blooms and perfect temperatures before summer’s heat and humidity hits. Being active outdoors is also good for your mental health, and growing research evidence confirms its benefits. Advantages of “green exercise” – intentionally being physically active in natural environments — include stress relief, clearer thinking, enhanced mood and happiness, less anxiety, more vitality, reduced pain sensations, improved sleep, and less tension and depression (*IDEA Fitness Journal, March 2018*).

**GET ENOUGH ZZZS**
Sleep is closely linked with one’s exercise ability, according to research. A Northwestern University study found that the less sleep you get, the shorter your exercise duration the next day is going to be. It makes sense; who feels like hitting the gym when they’re exhausted? Aim for at least seven to nine hours of sleep, and you’ll be better able to stick with your healthy habits.

**PAL UP**
Exercising with a friend can be more fun than sticking to a regimen all by yourself, and it offers some accountability, too. Start a lunchtime walking group with coworkers, sign up for a yoga class with your bestie, or train together for a 5k. Having a workout buddy can help you both stay motivated. After all, if you know a friend is waiting for you at the gym, you won’t want to stand them up.

**POWER YOUR BODY WITH THE RIGHT FUEL**
Nutrition is important for fitness. Eating a well-balanced diet can help you get the calories and nutrients you need to fuel your daily activities, including exercise. Spring is when the farmer’s markets start up, making it easy to eat nutritious vegetables and fruits in season. Strawberries, lettuce, asparagus, broccoli, collards, and blueberries are among the spring produce you may find. Plus, strolling a farmer’s market is a nice way to get a walk in on a Saturday morning.

Source: Anthem: Blue Cross, Blue Shield
During a stressful time, it can be difficult to eat healthy. Many people turn to sweets, cigarettes, alcohol, and larger meals to comfort them. Did you know that food helps to relieve stress? A proper diet can counterbalance the impact of stress by strengthening the immune system, stabilizing moods, and reducing blood pressure. Below are some tips on how to fuel your body to be better able to manage stress.

1. **Eat regularly.** Your brain needs glucose to work at its best. Eating regularly helps to keep your glucose stable.
2. **Eat healthy fats.** Omega-3 fatty acids found in walnuts, flax seed, chia seeds, fatty fish (salmon, tuna, etc) are associated with brain function. Deficiencies can result in depression and/or anxiety.
3. **Incorporate fruit and vegetables into your meals.** Vitamins and minerals such as copper, zinc, manganese and vitamin A, E, and C help neutralize harmful molecules produced when your body is under stress. Leafy greens and citrus fruit are good sources of these vitamins and minerals.
4. **Add high-fiber foods.** Higher fiber intake has been associated with greater alertness and decreased perceived stress. Add foods such as oatmeal, nuts, beans, fruits and vegetables into your diet.
5. **Decrease caffeine and increase sleep.** Caffeine can lead to increased blood pressure and increase in anxiety. Trade some of your caffeine intake with sleep.

Control your stress level by adopting a healthy lifestyle, which includes eating well, exercising, and getting adequate amounts of sleep.