

For older adults, volunteering could improve brain function

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Older adults worried about losing their cognitive functions could consider volunteering as a potential boost, according to a University of Missouri researcher. While volunteering and its associations with physical health are well known, less has been known about its associations with mental functioning. Now, Christine Proulx, an associate professor in the Human Development and Family Science Department in the MU College of Human Environmental Sciences, has identified a link between volunteering and higher levels of cognitive functioning in older adults.

"Cognitive functions, such as memory, working memory and processing are essential for living an independent life," Proulx said. "They're the tools and methods the brain uses to process information. It's the brain's working memory and processing capacity that benefit the most from volunteering."

Processing is how fast the mind is able to take in and store information. Working memory, which is different from long-term memory, is what the brain needs to temporarily store and manage

information.

For this study, Proulx used national data from the Health and Retirement Study, which has been collected for the past 25 years. Looking at results from more than 11,000 adults aged 51 and over, Proulx found significant associations between cognitive function and volunteering among all participants, regardless of the amount of time volunteering. However, adults with lower levels of education and women seemed to benefit the most from volunteering.

"Prior research has shown that [older adults](#) with lower levels of education are at greater risk of [cognitive decline](#)," Proulx said. "Engaging in volunteering might compensate for some of that risk."

Proulx suggests that volunteering benefits people because it stimulates the brain. When [volunteering](#) an individual must follow directions, solve problems and be active, all of which engage the mind's working [memory](#) and processing.

"Longitudinal Associations Between Formal Volunteering and Cognitive Functioning" was recently published in the *Journals of Gerontology: Social Sciences*.

More information: Christine M Proulx et al. Longitudinal Associations Between Formal Volunteering and Cognitive Functioning, *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B* (2017). [DOI: 10.1093/geronb/gbx110](https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbx110)

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