

Donating time: before and during coronavirus

You should be forgiven for thinking coronavirus is only about isolation and economic spirals. Countless news stories are reporting this critical message. Urgency and coordination are key to curbing the spread of Covid-19



Volunteers at a food bank in Madrid

But a silver lining is that in the face of an epidemic, communities tighten. While social distancing is encouraged, emotional distance is reduced. Because we are all facing the same challenge it's easier to sympathise and work together. Altruism blooms.

Day-to-day altruism

Altruism isn't new. Many of us help others out, either formally or informally. From picking up something from the shops for a housemate to running in the local fun-run or donating to a charity drive at work.

And altruistic activities are relatively stable over time. In 2018, the [CAF World Giving Index](#) showed that since the previous year, significantly more people across the globe reported helping a stranger and volunteering their time, while significantly fewer reported donating money to charity.

But the differences year-on-year were relatively small. 48.9% reported volunteering and helping strangers by donating their time in 2103, compared to 51.1% in 2017.

Around half of people around the world volunteer. And all of this adds up. The [UK Office for National Statistics](#) estimated the value of formal volunteering in the UK at £ 22.6 billion. The [impact](#) of volunteering is however relatively difficult to measure. It has both economic and social benefits but because it isn't paid or formally rewarded, the value isn't [explicit](#). Because of this, it is not necessarily front-of-mind. At least, not normally.

But these are anything but normal times. With the world's focus on coronavirus, the value of altruism, of helping each other out, is now more visible.

Not all about the money

The spread of coronavirus has promoted some generous financial donations, the [Gates](#) Foundation alone has donated \$100 million. And companies are utilising their skills and resources in a range of ways to support the efforts, from [Facebook](#) providing free advertising space for the World Health Organisation, to [Tesla](#) offering to ship free ventilators.

At a local level, many people are also providing support for each other. But not necessarily financially. The economy is spiralling, for many jobs and incomes are uncertain, household budgets are tighter than they were three weeks ago. But one thing many of us suddenly have a lot of is time. And we are willing to give it away.

Giving aplenty

Last week Time [reported](#) a quarter of a million people in the UK had registered to volunteer with the National Health Service (NHS) providing support to people with underlying health conditions. Stephen Powis, the medical director of NHS England exclaimed there had been “outbreaks of altruism.” And across the globe, [thousands](#) of volunteers have signed up to online platforms, sometimes in the forms of Google docs, as a means of connecting with those who could use some day-to-day support in self-isolation. Termed ‘mutual aid’ these groups are connecting to help their local area.

All in this together

Generosity is influenced by how familiar we are with a cause. A 2013 [study](#) found the small proportion of private US donors that give to international charities largely do so if they are foreign-born or have a strong religiosity associated with the region, while a UK [survey](#) conducted last year found a third of people are likely to donate to a cause that has helped somebody close to them. With coronavirus a global epidemic, everyone will be able to relate in some way.

Disasters can also bring us together because they elicit an emotional response to a shared experience that is front of mind for all. The more front-of-mind the issue is, the more people are likely to act. One [study](#) found that for each minute of news coverage devoted to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, donations rose on average by 13.2%.

Explaining giving

We help each other out because we care. And in a time of wide-spread crisis, uncertainty and fear can drive a helpful response, highlighting the altruistic activities that many are happy to provide.

We are motivated by a combination of wanting to help others as well as to help ourselves, something that is termed [impure altruism](#).

In the case of the coronavirus, being able to help ourselves stay healthy by cooperating with others and helping to prevent the spread is an obvious personal benefit. But there are others as well: by helping others we are [signalling](#) that we are cooperative people who give back to society and we can address feelings of moral [obligation](#), for example. Having a range of motivations for helping others out is good. It means that we are even more likely to support each other in times like these.

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