

The Big Give: A Personality Booster and a Prescription

Elizabeth Edwards, the wife of 2008 Democratic presidential hopeful John Edwards, is a member of two clubs to which no one ever wants to belong: parents whose children have died and cancer survivors. In 2006, when she toured the country reading from her memoir *Saving Graces*, she explained her motivation: “People tell me, ‘You’re so strong,’ but there’s a secret to this strength. It comes from the spider webs we build and what we knit together, and I just wanted to tell that story.” Everywhere she went, Edwards kept hammering home the same message: Keep family and friends close but also look beyond them. Call that waitress by her first name, take a moment to talk to someone who isn’t like you, embrace people for who they are, and give back to them when you can. In short, connect and you will weave your own safety net. Edwards repeatedly acknowledges John and her children, as well as other family members and close friends who cared for her when her sixteen-year-old son Wade died and when she was undergoing cancer treatment. At the same time, she also stresses the importance of people on the periphery. “I am stronger because Edward the mailman smiles and Sam at the grocery store smiles.”⁶⁷

We become even stronger when we smile back.

Thus far, we have stressed the importance of getting support from consequential strangers. It’s also beneficial to give to people outside our intimate circles. Henry Perlman was told early on by the old-timers in AA, “You only keep what you give away.” If he wanted to stay sober, he had to “do service”—make the coffee, bring the donuts, clean up after a meeting, and perhaps most important, reach out to newcomers.⁶⁸

Steve McCeney was twenty-four in 1984 when he learned he was HIV-positive. A psychologist, he went from isolation (telling only his brother and a close female friend) to socialization (getting involved with various support groups) and now has shifted his focus to outreach (leading yoga groups for people with AIDS). The progression parallels McCeney’s self-acceptance and increasingly better health.⁶⁹

Cindy Gibbs and twelve other cancer survivors she met when she relocated to a new neighborhood in Charlotte, North Carolina, dubbed themselves the “High Hopes.” They first participated in Relay for Life—a twenty-four-hour fund-raising walk symbolizing that cancer never sleeps. They then raised money for the Ronald McDonald House, a place that had nothing to do with cancer. “Maybe it was a symbol of us trying to move on.”⁷⁰

Psychologist Peggy Thoits, who has analyzed how people cope with negative events

over the long term, grants that factors such as environment, socioeconomic status, gender, race, and the composition of our convoys can limit or enhance our options. However, people who are higher in “personal agency”—the ability to make choices, take action, and set a new course in the face of problems—often manage their circumstances in ways that improve their situation. Such individuals usually have better “personal coping resources,” among them, high self-esteem, optimism, and a sense of “mastery” which allow them to believe they can handle the situation. They also experience fewer symptoms of depression or anxiety.⁷¹ Coincidentally, many of the same strengths are found in people who are “sociable”—agreeable and able to seek out others—which is also associated with better physical health.⁷²

When we rise above “seemingly unresolvable and inescapable difficulties,” says Thoits, we often do so by transforming the meaning of the event. Think Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, or Autism Speaks.⁷³ Social involvement can change how we see our misfortunes, because it puts us into a new role. No longer feeling like victims, patients, sufferers, caretakers, or even survivors, we instead become activists, supporters, lobbyists, teachers, and leaders of self-help groups.

Judith Snow travels around the world lecturing on inclusion so that other disabled individuals can join society despite their differences. Sylvia Mackey’s persistent phone calls and letters to the powers-that-be at the NFL resulted in “Plan 88” (named for the number her husband wore), which provides up to \$88,000 worth of home health care for former players with dementia. Both women are using difficult chapters in their own lives to help others cope with theirs. But the “Big Give,” to use Oprah’s phrase, also benefits the donor. And like social integration (or perhaps because of it), dosage matters: The more people do, the greater the benefits. Their physical and mental health improves, and they experience lower levels of chronic pain and depression.⁷⁴

But what enables those who are suffering mentally and physically, who are carrying large burdens to begin with, to reach beyond themselves and focus on a bigger picture, a more distant goal? Is it their personalities—are they more resilient, more caring? Or does the act of getting involved with a wide variety of others cause them to become the kind of person who then “pays it forward”? The question might never be answered, but increasing evidence suggests that the two factors—social context and personality—can work independently and influence each other.⁷⁵

Consider Seventh-Day Adventists in Loma Linda, California, and people residing in Okinawa, Japan, and Sardinia, Italy—locales that seem to have little in common except that

their residents live longer than the rest of us. In all three places, residents eat healthy diets and get lots of exercise. They are surrounded by family and friends.⁷⁶ But it's their strong community involvement that caused psychologist Brent Roberts to speculate that they also live more harmoniously and have more positive personalities to boot.

Roberts's conjecture is based on his "social investment" theory: "Those who invest more in social institutions," he explains, "tend to be warmer, more responsible and organized, and less anxious and depressed than others."⁷⁷ Roberts grants that certain people are more likely to engage in social investment—and more likely to be the types sought out by organizations—because of their personalities. Scientists call this the "selection effect." However, the fake-it-till-you-make-it principle—technically, the "socialization effect"—applies, too: Commitment to a particular role requires you to get along with others, take responsibility, and be even-tempered. If you don't naturally possess such traits, over time, being committed to the role will help you develop them. Although one can theoretically "invest" in solo pursuits, Roberts stresses, "most of these activities involve crossing paths. It's the ties and binds that impart the effect."⁷⁸

67. Elizabeth Edwards, *Saving Graces: Finding Solace and Strength from Friends and Strangers* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006); E. Edwards, book-signing talk, Barnes & Noble, New York City, October 2, 2006; and interview on *Today*, September 20, 2006.

68. Henry Perlman, interview.

69. Steve McCeney, interview with Blau, April 11, 2008.

70. Cindi Gibbs, interview with Blau, March 18, 2008.

71. Peggy A. Thoits, "Personal Agency in the Stress Process," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 47 (December 2006): 309–23.

72. Sheldon Cohen, "Social Relationships and Health," 2004.

73. Thoits, "Personal Agency in the Stress Process."

74. Peggy A. Thoits and Lyndi N. Hewitt, "Volunteer Work and Well-Being," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 42 (June, 2001): 115–31; S. L. Brown et al., "Providing Social Support May Be More Beneficial Than Receiving," *Psychological Science* 14 (2003): 320–27.

75. Sheldon Cohen, "Social Relationships and Health," 2004.

76. Dan Buettner, *The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who've Lived the Longest* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Press, 2008).

77. Jennifer Lodi-Smith and Brent W. Roberts, "Social Investment and Personality: A Meta-Analysis of the Relationship of Personality Traits to Investment in Work, Family, Religion, and Volunteerism," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 11 (2007): 68–86; Brent W. Roberts, Dustin Wood, and Jennifer L. Smith, "Evaluating Five Factor Theory and Social Investment Perspective on Personality Trait Development," *Journal of Research in Personality* 39 (2004): 166–84. To document his social investment theory, Roberts "meta-analyzed" data from ninety-four studies that looked at how certain personality traits played out at work, in the family, and in religious and volunteer settings—all venues that involve consequential strangers. Even investment in family roles includes casual relationships—people your partner and your children know.

78. Brent Roberts, interview with Blau, November 7, 2006.