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In Month of Giving, a Healthy Reward

By [TARA PARKER-POPE](#)

When Cami Walker of Los Angeles learned three years ago that she had multiple sclerosis, her health and her spirits plummeted — until she got an unusual prescription from a holistic health educator.

Ms. Walker, now 36, scribbled the idea in her journal. And though she dismissed it at first, after weeks of fatigue, insomnia, pain and preoccupation with her symptoms, she decided to give it a try. The treatment and her experience with it are summed up in the title of her new book, “29 Gifts: How a Month of Giving Can Change Your Life” (Da Capo Press).

Ms. Walker gave a gift a day for 29 days — things like making supportive phone calls or saving a piece of chocolate cake for her husband. The giving didn’t cure her multiple sclerosis, of course. But it seems to have had a startling effect on her ability to cope with it. She is more mobile and less dependent on pain medication. The flare-ups that routinely sent her to the emergency room have stopped, and scans show that her disease has stopped progressing.

“My first reaction was that I thought it was an insane idea,” Ms. Walker said. “But it has given me a more positive outlook on life. It’s about stepping outside of your own story long enough to make a connection with someone else.”

And science appears to back her up. “There’s no question that it gives life a greater meaning when we make this kind of shift in the direction of others and get away from our own self-preoccupation and problems,” said Stephen G. Post, director of the Center for Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care and Bioethics at Stony Brook University on Long Island and a co-author of “Why Good Things Happen to Good People” (Broadway, 2007). “But it also seems to be the case that there is an underlying biology involved in all this.”

An array of studies have documented this effect. In one, a 2002 Boston College study, researchers found that patients with chronic pain fared better when they counseled other pain patients, experiencing less depression, intense pain and disability.

Another study, at the Buck Institute for Age Research in Novato, Calif., also found a strong benefit to volunteerism, and after controlling for a number of variables, showed that elderly people who volunteered for more than four hours a week were 44 percent less likely to die during the study period.

How giving can lead to mental and physical changes in health isn't entirely clear, although studies suggest that altruism may be an antidote to stress. A Miami study of patients with H.I.V. found that those with strong altruistic characteristics had lower levels of stress hormones.

By contrast, being self-centered may be damaging to health. In one study of 150 heart patients, researchers found that people in the study who had more "self-references" (those who talked about themselves at length or used more first-person pronouns) had more severe heart disease and did worse on treadmill tests.

And like Ms. Walker, numerous people have reported feeling better after helping others. A 1988 *Psychology Today* article dubbed the effect the "helper's high." Analyzing two separate surveys of a total of 3,200 women who regularly volunteered, the article described a physical response from volunteering, similar to the results of vigorous exercise or meditation. The strongest effect was seen when the act of altruism involved direct contact with other people.

For Ms. Walker, a former creative director for an advertising agency, most of the gifts involved time, emotional support or small acts of kindness. After the first 29 days, she began a new cycle, a pattern she continues. Neither she nor Mbali Creazzo, the spiritual adviser who taught her about the month of giving, knows why it is 29 days rather than 30 or 31 — it may have something to do with the lunar cycle, which is 29.5 days.

Ms. Walker says she now approaches daily giving as a crucial part of her treatment, just like regular medication. She has also found new purpose in her experience and started a Web site, 29gifts.org, that encourages giving to improve health.

"Giving for 29 days is not suggested as a cure for anything," Ms. Walker said. "It's simply a coping mechanism and a simple tool you can use that can help you change your thinking about whatever is going on. If you change your thinking, you change your experience."

Dr. Post, of Stony Brook, agreed. "To rid yourself of negative emotional states," he said, "you need to push them aside with positive emotional states.

"And the simplest way to do that is to just go out and lend a helping hand to somebody."