

# The Benefits of Volunteering

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So many times over the years when talking with a friend or a health care professional during an appointment I would say to them oh yes I think volunteering would be a hugely good thing for me, and yet it took me until late 2015 to actually put that idea into action. The repetition of it became merely a platitude, serving as a smoke screen I'd use to insist I was more hopeful than I perhaps ever was. But I saw a sign when I was browsing a local charity shop and without giving myself time to hesitate and turn around, approached the desk and asked for more information.

It's not easy to admit you need to downscale the map you'd originally had for your future. I graduated from university in 2009 and got good results. I was supposed to get a job in my degree subject and make use of the skills I took away from years of studying. I should be earning good money and be financially self sufficient and secure. That was the idea. I see highlights from my fellow alumni on Facebook and many are doing well for themselves. Even those who went in an entirely different career direction seem have been able to find a place for themselves in a worthwhile job role. Of course I am aware that appearances can be distorted and not all is ever as it seems, but work social event photos and CV relevant details listed on profiles are evidence enough. Everyone seems to be further ahead. Not just that but miles further.

I've been ill for a long time now. I don't need to measure the time to determine that. When I first developed an eating disorder in my teens no way did I ever imagine it would be an issue for me as a 30 year old woman. So I guess I've had to downscale that idea of what life would be by a lot. Having to rely on benefits doesn't feel good. It's something that holds a huge stigma around it and an eating disordered mindset of course will thrive on that shame. I hope someday I will be able to work more than this, but for now beating myself up over what never was is futile and leads me further away from that possibility.

This is why volunteering is become so valuable. It provides me with a purpose; concrete motivator, often a reason to get up some mornings. It puts me in touch with other people, with the world, forces me to be counted as a person. My brain is stimulated and I don't just sit at home feeling depressed and listless. Yet it is slow paced. If I need time off or to leave early because I feel dizzy it's okay, if I have a hypo during a shift I can take all the time out I need to recover. Fortunately my boss couldn't be more brilliant and understanding.

Someone once offered me some wise words that have stuck in my mind, after I'd complained of being worthless. They said (paraphrasing by memory): *"You ARE doing something worthwhile as a volunteer, even more so in fact than 9 to 5 office workers just doing it for the pay checks. You are giving up time and actively wanting to help"*. It was a different way of looking at it, and one I am holding on to tightly.