

Older and Wiser: There's still a benefit to volunteering, even during COVID

April 18 to April 24 is National Volunteer Week across Canada

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A senior volunteers her time at a recycling depot. Getty Images

What do you do when you retire? A great option is to volunteer.

Sometimes people who are retired or about to retire tell me they are worried about how they are going to use the extra time they have gained by not working at a paid job.

These people have some idea about the future of their retirement, such as increasing their travel both locally and internationally, taking up more satisfying hobbies or endeavours to increase their knowledge or skills (art, writing, painting), and increasing their time with family and friends.

However, because of COVID-19, many are worried that these plans are being curtailed leaving them with less purpose in life, more time and perhaps contributing to their isolation, poor mental health, and lack of social connections.

Of course, as I have written in previous columns, overcoming some of the negative effects of the restrictions caused by COVID-19 can be mitigated by getting out into your neighbourhood for a

distanced walk, trying online virtual classes and programs, keeping in touch with your family and friends through virtual or old fashioned means such as telephoning, sending letters or socially-distanced visiting (not exceeding provincial guidelines, of course) and getting on with those tasks you put aside while you were working (organizing your closets, sorting your photos, painting or renovating, and cooking projects).

But now, as I would have before COVID-19, I am recommending that volunteering should be added to your list. The benefits of volunteering accrue exponentially to you, your family, friends, and your community in significant ways.

The Conference Board of Canada in a 2018 report estimated that over two billion volunteer hours are generated by volunteers in Canada every year.

During COVID-19 numerous people have stepped up to help in various ways thus contributing to their society during a crisis in a very real way. They have been providing distanced rides to appointments, providing friendly phoning services, dropping off cheery gift baskets for special events (Thanksgiving, Christmas, Valentines), grocery shopping, meal preparation, prescription pick-up, writing up cards to send out to isolated folks and lately assisting at vaccine clinics.

April 18 to April 24 is National Volunteer Week across Canada. This is a time to celebrate the amazing work that millions of volunteers across Canada have done.

On the Volunteer Canada website it states, "that the theme for 2021, The Value of One, The Power of Many, reflects on the awe-inspiring acts of kindness by millions of individuals and the magic that happens when we work together towards a common purpose. This past year, we have seen people supporting family, friends, neighbours, and strangers, people standing up to systemic racism, and people sharing insights on how to create a more just and equitable society."

On a more personal level the benefits of volunteering include physical and mental rewards, more contact with others, opportunities to learn and gain knowledge, increase in our self esteem, opportunities to give back, a sense of satisfaction, feeling more empowered and valued, chances to meet new people and opportunities to share talents and wisdom you may have gained throughout your life.

Where do I get started as a volunteer you might be asking, especially as COVID-19 is still with us. It might be helpful to assess your own time, skills, and interests before you leap in. Some people may want to do the exact opposite of a job they once had, but others may want to use the skills they accrued in their life when they volunteer.

The choices are wonderful and varied and generally there is something for everyone. You could sit on a committee or board, run an exercise program (virtually now), assist a senior to access the internet or the class you are hosting, be part of a phone tree to check in on people who are self isolating, drive someone to get their vaccine, contribute and edit a newsletter, teach an online course, or host a book club.

If you want to chase up a volunteer opportunity yourself, call around to organizations in your community and see what they have to offer. The North Shore Community Resources Society in partnership with North Shore News has just published the new 2021 Seniors Directory which lists a variety of organizations. Phone NSCR at 604-982-3302 to obtain a copy.

Volunteering is a great way to spend your time. Try it and you will like it.

Margaret Coates is the co-ordinator of Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. She has lived on the North Shore for 51 years and has worked for and with seniors for 25 of those years. Ideas for future columns are welcome. Email: lions_view@telus.net