



THE TREE IS DECORATED, THE MENORAH IS READY TO BE LIT AND EVERYONE SEEMS TO BE BRIMMING WITH HOLIDAY CHEER—EXCEPT YOU, THAT IS.

Maybe it's the constant stream of bad news that keeps popping up on your feed. Maybe it's the nagging sense that you didn't accomplish as much as you'd hoped to this year. Whatever the reason, this holiday season you're just not feeling it.

Believe it or not, there's a solution to your end-of-year blues: volunteering. We know, we know—you've probably heard the "true meaning of Christmas/Hanukkah/Kwanzaa" spiel a million times, but there's actual evidence that links *doing good* with *feeling good*.

A recent study published in the *Journal of Adolescence* proved that acts of kindness and selfless behavior toward strangers was directly tied to an increase in self-worth and a decrease in mental health issues like depression.

"Volunteering can lead to higher levels of self-esteem and empathy, a sense of accomplishment and an understanding that there's something 'bigger' than yourself," says Dr. Nekeshia Hammond, a psychologist in Brandon, Fla. "It can teach you about your strengths."

With so many benefits, tons of teens should be embracing the volunteer life, right? Not quite. According to a report from the University of Maryland's Do Good Institute, the number of high school-age volunteers dropped from 28 percent in 2002 to 23 percent in 2015. Increased political activism from teenagers in the past two years may shift those numbers up slightly; but even so, less than a quarter of young people are choosing to donate their time for a purpose.

FINDING A CAUSE

So how can you improve your community—and yourself?

Chances are, there are a million things you care about. Watching the news, it can be hard not to want to save our diminishing natural resources, feed hungry children, support victims of abuse, help homeless animals—and every other heart-tugging cause you come across. But here's the sad truth: You can't fix everything.

That doesn't mean you can't make a difference, though. Take Kenzie H., 13, a recent honoree of the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes (as are all the girls you'll meet ahead). At 10, Kenzie gave a speech for 4-H about hunger that would totally change her life.

"When you look at the statistics, hunger is right in your backyard—and you never even thought about it," she says. "Where I'm from in North Carolina, one in three children don't have access to healthy food. When I learned that, I felt like if there's something I can do, I have to do it."

Kenzie started small by volunteering at food pantries. But as she began to learn more about the problem of hunger, she wanted to improve the systems that were already in place.

"At most of the pantries, they don't get a choice of fresh produce, fresh meat, snacks and stuff like that," Kenzie says. "I got the idea to start one and set it up like a grocery store. We started in a church fellowship hall serving 50 people a month. Now we have 5,800 square feet and serve around 7,000 people a month."

FINDING THE STRENGTH

Big projects like Kenzie's require many moving parts—from finding donors and sponsors to securing financing and scheduling volunteers. But making a difference can be as simple as just doing what you already like to do.

Just ask Bria N., 11, who combined her love of animals with her passion for art—and has raised almost \$33,000 for at-risk creatures. "There are over 3,000 endangered species," says Bria. "I don't want them to go extinct. So I used my time and

talents to showcase endangered animals in my paintings."

She began selling her work on Facebook and her website, and things took off. And while it was Bria's artistic gifts that helped her make a difference, almost any skill you have can be a strength. Love social media? Volunteer to make adorable IGTV vids starring the animals at a rescue. Are you an awesome writer? Pitch in by penning the newsletter for a women's shelter.

Whatever you choose to do, don't limit yourself or sell yourself short. When Shreya R., 15, began researching grey water—which is lightly used water from places like the kitchen sink or laundry—she says people weren't ready to take her seriously. She began her work when she was only 11, which meant scientists didn't exactly see her as an expert at the time.

"A lot of people thought I was honestly too young—and that's still a problem for me today," she says. "A lot of

labs don't want to take me in because they don't see me as someone who can conduct research or make an impact on these issues. But it's getting better, I think: When people hear me talk about this issue, they understand I have knowledge on the subject."

Since founding The Grey Water Project, Shreya has conducted research that proves grey water in houses that use organic laundry detergent or soap nuts is safe for irrigation use. Her work has persuaded people around the country to install "laundry to lawn" systems.

"It's immensely rewarding. I've had people come back and tell me they've implanted a grey water system and they're saving lots of water now," says Shreya. "That just makes me so happy because I'm actually initiating change in my community."

FINDING YOUR PEOPLE

Oh, and one more thing about volunteering: You don't have to do it alone.

Hillary Schafer, CEO of the Jefferson Awards Foundation (a nonprofit with a program called Students in Action, which works with high schoolers to teach them how to be effective volunteers), says doing good is all about teamwork and a sense of community. "In the world we live in right now, which is so fractured and where people seem to only care about themselves, we're starting to see this unbelievable outpouring of focus on others," she says. "Connectedness is almost like an antidote to divisiveness."

And do-gooding can be contagious. Students in Action, for example, calculated that every student they trained in the program engaged 20 to 30 other students in volunteer work.

Says Schafer: "As a result, we have a community of empowered, competent young people who are generating service that is much greater than they could have ever done on their own." Now *that's* the holiday spirit. 🎁

START HERE

Not sure where to begin? Check out this trio of awesome organizations.

DoSomething.org

Made for teens, DoSomething asks you what you're passionate about, how much time you have and what type of work you'd like to do. Then, it'll help connect you with the right volunteer opp.

I Am That Girl

Part girls' empowerment and part social responsibility, IATG helps young women feel confident in themselves, learn to build each other up and turn those good vibes into positive actions around the community.

School on Wheels

You've heard of Meals on Wheels, but this org connects homeless students with peer tutors to help them succeed when their environment is making it difficult.