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Autism FILE™

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Providing Hope and Help for Autism Families

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GRATITUDE AND GIVING

With myriad nonprofit organizations all needing support, which efforts are a good fit for your hopes and philosophies?

BY DEIRDRE IMUS

It is often during life's most challenging times that we learn about gratitude. We are grateful for the help of family, for a friend's unconditional support, or for a steaming cup of coffee. Sometimes, we are grateful simply because we know that no matter how difficult circumstances seem—and with kids of any nature, there are some doozies—usually, it could always be worse.

When these moments of clarity strike, we must seize them; hug our children, kiss our spouses—and think about how to spread this good fortune far and wide. Whether you prefer to donate time, money, or resources, there is always—always—something you can do to give back, to make life a little easier for someone else, and to make a difference in the world.

WEALTH OF OPPORTUNITY

According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics, there are currently more than 1.5 million nonprofit organizations in the United States. Some are large, some are tiny, and they range in scope from combating illnesses like cancer and training service dogs to raising awareness of environmental issues and assisting children with autism and their families.

It is fantastic and encouraging that so many worthwhile foundations exist. Unfortunately, it is also



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overwhelming. You may find yourself wanting to contribute to a cause, but unsure of where to start, or if a particular organization is even worthy of your time, money, and attention. We are a country of excess, and (happily) wanting to help others is no exception.

The importance of this dilemma cannot be overstated. While someone might start a nonprofit with the noblest of intentions, sometimes these intentions get muddled along the way. Or new leadership takes an organization in a different, less legitimate direction. Or an accounting error causes funds to be misdirected,

stolen, or worse. When you decide to align yourself with a cause, you should feel good about it, which is sometimes easier said than done.

NARROWING THE OPTIONS

Luckily, there are several ways to procure the information necessary to help you make an educated charitable choice. One of the better known providers of such knowledge is GuideStar.org, itself a public charity. GuideStar gathers and disseminates information about every single IRS-registered nonprofit organization in the U.S. As they note on their website, GuideStar is neither a charity evaluator nor a watchdog. They merely collect, organize, and present users relevant information on a nonprofit—its mission, finances, governance, and more—in a straightforward, easily accessible format.

GuideStar users can search for worthy causes in a number of ways—by

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Greening The Cleaning® program and product line, which replaces the hazardous ingredients commonly found in cleaning agents with environmentally-responsible, less toxic ingredients whenever possible. The program and products are used throughout the country in schools, healthcare facilities, and businesses. ◀

location, by sector, or by name. And users can review charities much like they do coffee shops or shoes, offering caution or endorsement to potential donors in partnership with another website, GreatNonprofits.org.

Think about how much time you spend researching where you'll have dinner on Saturday night, or which vacuum to buy. Thirty minutes? Probably more? Whether you receive goods in return or not, any investment of your money is worth at least as much attention as where you'll find the best Italian food in a 30 mile radius.

A GIFT TO YOURSELF

After all, giving to charity can make you feel as good as a satisfying meal, or maybe better. Research has shown that when people decide to donate to a charity they deem worthy, the region of the brain that controls food and sex cravings becomes more active. Additionally, the 2010 “Do Good Live Well Survey” found that the majority of people who volunteer feel physically healthier, have an improved sense of well-being, and experience lower stress levels.

Giving to charity is great; it is selfless and it is necessary. But organizations aren't always needed to raise awareness of issues that matter in your life. If you're lucky enough to be passionate about a cause, be proud of it, too. I have been a vegetarian for more than 25 years, and I talk about this lifestyle choice often—publically and privately—because I truly believe it is a healthier option, not only for myself and my family, but maybe for you and yours, and also for the planet.

Most people don't want to be preached to, and that is their right. But there are subtle ways to encourage more charitable behavior, especially in your kids, that will make it seem less like an obligation and more like a whole lot of fun.

Many nonprofits raise money and awareness through a walking, running or biking event. The noncompetitive nature of most of these types of



events makes them a great outing for the whole family, whether participating, volunteering, or supporting. It's also a wonderful excuse to get outside and have a destination for the day, which as anyone with kids can attest, is sometimes more important than the activity itself.

BROADENING THE BENEFITS

For some children on the autism spectrum, a charitable event that involves running or walking may have benefits beyond just doing a good deed. In 2012, the nonprofit Achilles International, which enables people with all types of disabilities to participate in mainstream athletics, designed a running program specifically geared toward children with autism. So far, anecdotal evidence has shown a marked improvement in these children's emotional and physical health, and a recent grant from the Cigna Foundation will support research efforts to explore this positive association, and understand how running might be harnessed as a therapy for kids on the autism spectrum.

Encouraging physical activity is important for all kids (and adults, by the way!), but is of particular consequence for those with autism. According to recent research from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly 32 percent of adolescents with

autism are obese, more than any other group of adolescents, with or without developmental disabilities. Another recent study linked obesity in children on the spectrum with increased anxiety, sleep problems, and depression.

Of course, nobody knows your child's limits better than you do. If participating in an event with large groups of people and lots of stimulation will be just terrifyingly overwhelming, or if you fear they may wander, then opt for a different charitable venture. Or sit on the sidelines and cheer on other participants—it can be exciting for any child to see a familiar face whiz by in the crowd!

Generosity can have unimaginable reverberations. When an organization holds a 5K to raise money and awareness, its good intentions have legs: such events bring communities together; encourage people to spend time outdoors; give participants a sense of purpose; promote exercise; and more. It's pretty incredible, if you really stop to think about it.

Giving to charity is a very personal decision, and one that should not be taken lightly. If you're in a position to help, be grateful for that. If you're in need of help, be grateful for the kindness of others. ◀

Note: Information provided herein is not intended to treat or diagnose any health condition. As always, consult your healthcare provider with any questions or health concerns.