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Stressed? Helping others may make you feel better, study says

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The holidays are full of presents, parties and plates of goodies, but they can also bring an unwanted gift: stress.

Now, a study says simple acts of kindness – like giving directions, buying someone's coffee or helping with homework – can improve your mental health and make you feel less stressed out.

"Our research shows that when we help others we can also help ourselves," study author Emily Ansell of the Yale University School of Medicine explained in a news release.

"Stressful days usually lead us to have a worse mood and poorer mental health, but our findings suggest that if we do small things for others, such as holding a door open for someone, we won't feel as poorly on stressful days."

For the study, Yale researchers asked 77 adults to track their everyday stress levels – as well as their helpful behaviors to friends, acquaintances and strangers – on their smartphones. Participants also completed daily emotion and mental health questionnaires.

Those who performed small acts of kindness were more likely to have positive days than those who didn't, the researchers found. In addition, they were less rattled by stressful situations.

Although the study was small and more research is needed, the findings couldn't come at a better time, Ansell suggests.

"The holiday season can be a very stressful time, so think about giving directions, asking someone if they need help, or holding that elevator door over the next month," she says. "It may end up helping you feel just a little bit better."

The study was published in Clinical Psychological Science, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.