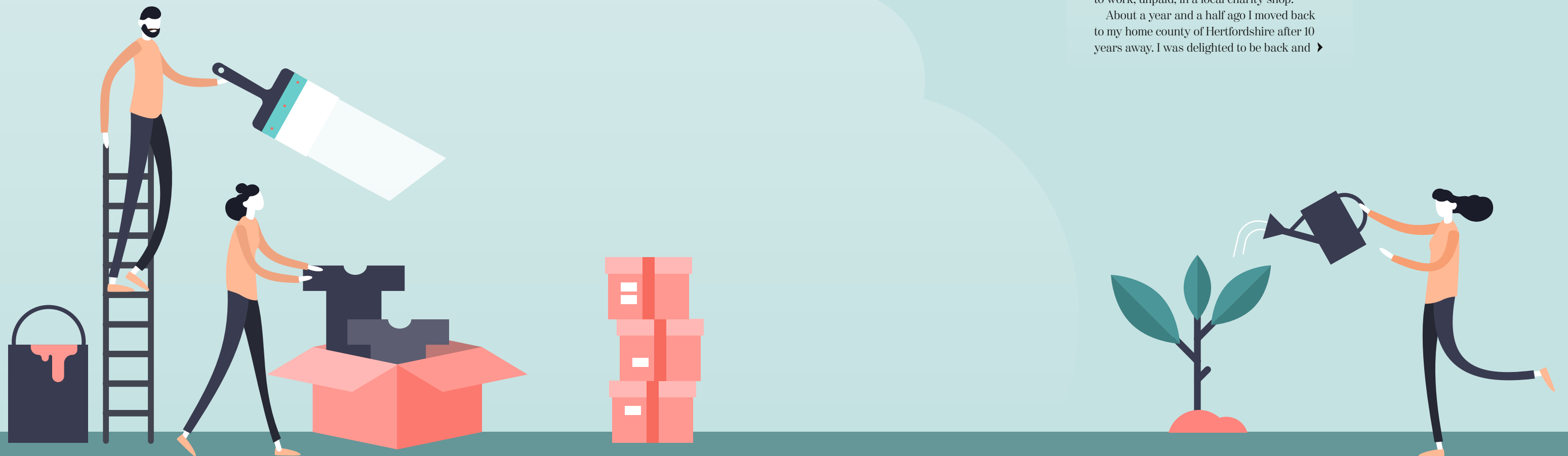


# THE DIFFERENCE IS YOU

*Helping others can bring a shift in perspective and a renewed sense of purpose, finds Sarah Graham*

As a freelance writer I've spent the last five years firmly in the mindset that time is money. I can't even allow myself a week's holiday without working overtime before and after to make up for the lost billable hours. So I was as surprised as anyone when I found myself gladly giving up several hours each week to work, unpaid, in a local charity shop.

About a year and a half ago I moved back to my home county of Hertfordshire after 10 years away. I was delighted to be back and ►



building a forever home with my husband; I loved our new house, and our new greener, quieter lifestyle after five years in London.

But lots had changed in the preceding decade, and my mental health had been in a bad way for the best part of a year before the move. I was really struggling, and – despite now having my parents and best friend just down the road – I still felt more isolated than I'd expected. Working from home, as much as I've always loved it, didn't really help matters when I was feeling low.

What did help though, I discovered, was the time I started spending as a volunteer at the Age UK charity shop in Hitchin, where I was immediately made to feel at home by full-time staff Flo and Denise, as well as the friendly team of other volunteers.

No two weeks are ever the same when you volunteer. Over the last year and a half I've found myself helping out with everything from working on the till and organising the shop floor, to sorting donations and steaming clothes in the stock room.

*“No two weeks are ever the same when you volunteer”*

I've also met the most fascinating array of people – people I'd never otherwise stumble across in my day-to-day life – and each week brings weird and wonderful conversations. I probably chat more in those four hours than I do in the entire rest of the week and, as an added bonus, there's always a plentiful supply of tea and biscuits on offer, as well as first dibs on new stock.

In fact, having begun as a convenient way to force myself out of the house – and out of my own head – volunteering quickly became an essential part of my weekly routine. The simple act of committing to get out and use my brain in a different way, for other people's benefit, helped give me a whole new perspective, and slowly but surely my mood began to lift.

No matter how I'm feeling when I enter the shop, or what thoughts are racing round my head, it's difficult to waste too much time ruminating when my brain is immersed in the task of perfectly organising a shelf of shoes or handbags by size and colour, or when I'm chatting to a sweet elderly customer about his memories of whichever vintage tune is playing on the in-store radio.

As I usually spend my Wednesday mornings volunteering, it's also become a lovely way of breaking up my working week and given me some of the structure that can feel a bit lacking when you're self-employed.

But the biggest surprise for me has been the creative benefits. I've been amazed by



how frequently a fresh new idea springs to mind while I'm mindfully engrossed in reordering the books or taking down out-of-date stock. Equally often, an article intro or conclusion that I've been wrangling with for days beforehand will perfectly form itself inside my head while I'm using my brain to count out change or work out the best way to arrange the bric-a-brac.

Really, it's been nothing short of transformational. My mental health has improved enormously; I've made new contacts in my local area, gained new skills, and used skills I already have in ways I'd never previously thought about.

The lost hours of paid work don't bother me either. It feels worthwhile just knowing I'm making even a tiny difference, and I find that I now work more efficiently when I am at my desk – getting just as much paid work done, only in less time. But what is it about volunteering that makes us feel so good, and why does it have such a mindful and creative effect on our brains?

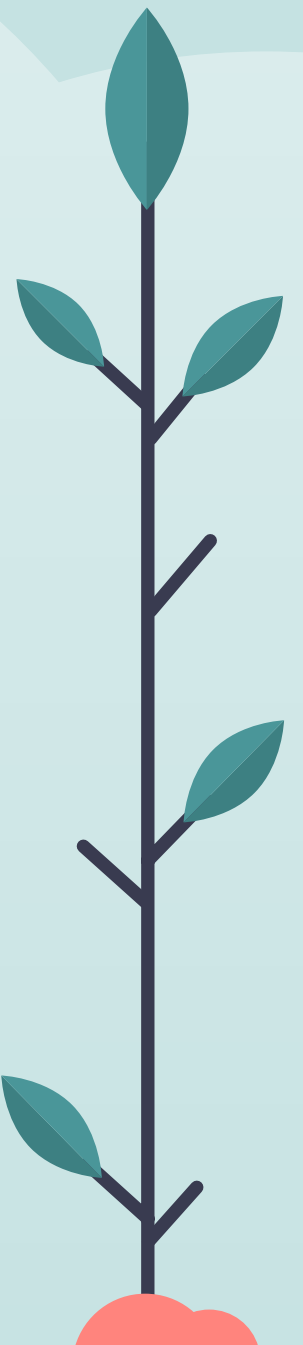
“The main psychological effect of volunteering is that it takes you out of yourself,” explains Dr Gary Wood, author of *Unlock Your Confidence* (Watkins Media) and a solution-focused coach. “In lots of instances of depression and anxieties, people tend to spend a lot of time looking inwards and ruminating. Volunteering is something that helps you focus on something else, and you're in control of it.”

*“By helping you to forget yourself, it brings you into the present moment”*

For Gary, there are a number of factors to this mood-boosting effect, and they all tally with my own experience. “Volunteering can be very mindful simply because, by helping you to forget yourself, it brings you into the present moment. It gets you into a state of flow where you're not over-analysing or thinking too much about things, you're just living in the here and now,” he says.

“It's also a way of connecting people to their values and passions – like volunteering to read books to children at the local library if you have a love of literature, or helping to pass on parenting skills if you've been there and know just how difficult it can be. When everything else might feel a bit out of control, people want to feel like they're making a little difference in their own corner of the world.”

For Denise Taylor, a chartered psychologist and award-winning career coach, the social side of volunteering is key to its benefits. “It's a feeling of belonging, that we're not on our own and we're giving something back. Just doing something where you're helping others stops you



thinking about your own problems, and can even help put them in perspective,” she says.

“I think it also gives people a sense of purpose, especially for those who perhaps don’t get it from their job. People really appreciate volunteers and say ‘thank you’, which might be something they never get at work,” she adds. Indeed, she points out, volunteering can also be a stepping-stone towards a career change or new job, by enabling volunteers to develop their leadership skills and confidence, or gain skills for their CV in a particular area.

And though I’m not planning on using my newfound skills to pursue a career change, there’s certainly something to be said for the confidence I’ve gained from volunteering, which for me has gone hand-in-hand with my improved mental health, self-esteem, and sense of purpose.

It’s an interesting phenomenon, and one which Dr Wood highlights in his book. “We boost our own confidence as we focus on building it in others,” he explains. “It is really connected to the meaning of life. It’s all about finding something meaningful in everyday things and passing on something nice. Although we can often have a very negative view of people, people generally do like to help, so volunteering is a good way of reconnecting with our basic humanity.” 📖

*“We boost our own confidence as we build it in others”*

## GET VOLUNTEERING!

*Feeling inspired to volunteer a few hours of your week? There are plenty of ways to get started*

*Ask around at your local charity shops, schools, libraries, youth clubs, community or faith groups. There will be plenty of opportunities available, whether you want to volunteer in a shop, coach a youth sports team, or provide companionship for an older person.*

*Think about how your specific skills and passions could benefit a local charity or community group. Perhaps you’re great at social media or IT, a brilliant handyperson, or could you provide free training workshops in your area of expertise. Both you and your chosen cause will get most benefit from your voluntary work if you’re doing something you really care about.*

*Search [ncvo.org.uk](https://www.ncvo.org.uk) for your nearest Volunteer Centre or check out [do-it.org](https://www.do-it.org) for a list of opportunities in your local area.*

