



My Volunteering Journey (March 16)



Preface

Hello dear reader!

In ***My Volunteering Journey***, I have written about:

- A. Why I volunteer and how I started
- B. Personal experiences
- C. Doubts
- D. Future plans

I hope you can learn more about volunteering, try out a few events and eventually commit to an organisation!

I would like to thank everyone who has supported me in writing this. Family, friends, volunteers, staff members, elderly and other organisations: whether directly or indirectly, you have all made a difference!

Julian Choo

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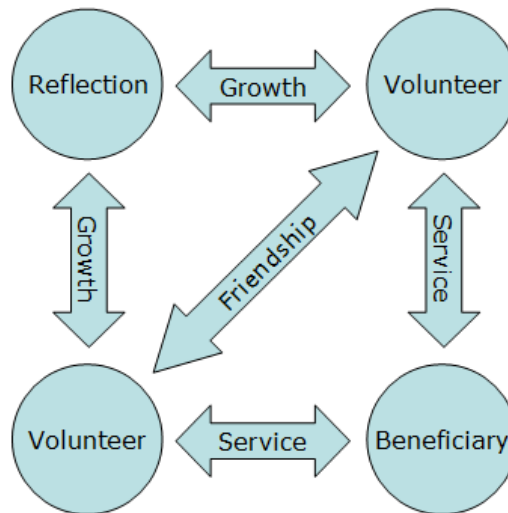
Acknowledgements

Section A: Introduction

I am 21 years old this year, and will be studying Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Psychology in August. My hobbies are reading, going for walks and, of course, volunteering!

The volunteering process

Volunteering is to willingly provide a service to a beneficiary without pay.

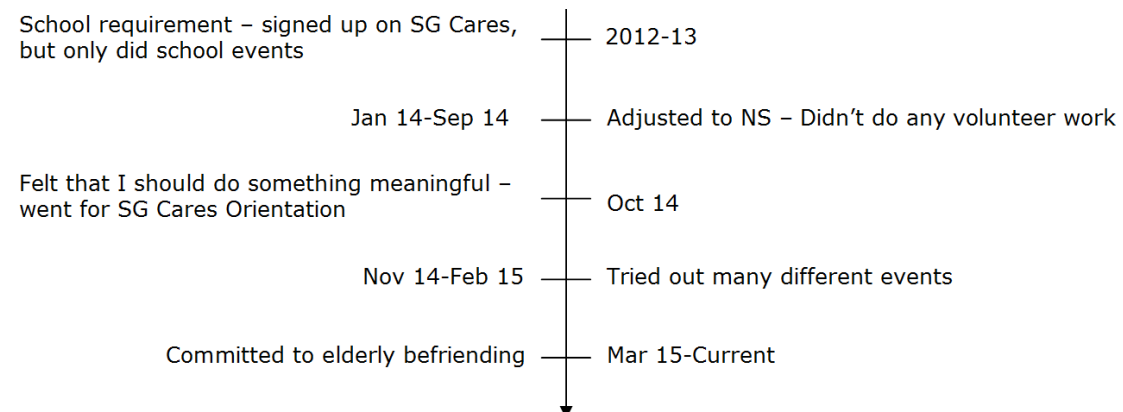


Why I volunteer

"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others." – Gandhi

When others are happy, I am happy as well. I cannot explain further; you must experience this joy from volunteering yourself!

How I started volunteering



(SG Cares is now known as giving.sg)

Section B: My Personal Experiences

Each volunteer's journey is unique.

Why I volunteer as an elderly befriender

"I cannot do all the good that the world needs, but the world needs all the good that I can do." – Jana Stanfield



Photo credit: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/37078205@N06/4340765452>

1. Every cause is good, but I feel that the elderly need the most attention.
2. At this stage in life, the elderly need more company than money.
3. There is so much to learn from each elderly!
4. If I don't try to understand the ageing population now, when will I start?

An NUS article writes it this way:

...the real scourge afflicting Singaporeans today is loneliness. Sure, the many programmes targeting hypertension, diabetes and cataracts among the elderly are useful, but what about their creeping sense of loneliness?

Many elderly have forgotten how to make friends. As befrienders, we make the first move. Over time, we brighten their lives and find ours brighter too.

Organisations I volunteer with

The New Charis Mission	2.5 hours	Wednesday nights
Lions Befrienders (Pipit Road)	2.5 hours	Saturday mornings
SILRA Joy Gathering	3 hours	Saturday afternoons
Lions Befrienders (Aljunied Crescent)	4 hours	Sunday afternoons

General services



Basic befriending



Promote active ageing

The New Charis Mission



Outings



Home improvements

Birthday celebrations



None of this is possible without trust! Befrienders must build and maintain relationships by weekly visitations.

Making a difference

"Whatever you do may be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it." – Gandhi



You may have read articles about depression and rising suicide rates among the elderly in Singapore:

Families sometimes take sadness and loneliness for granted in their elderly, saying it's a part of growing old...that should not be the case.

Feeling lonely raised one's risk of dying by 34 per cent...Sometimes, what old people need is simply friendship.















A few of them do get visited once or twice a month, but that is **far from enough**.

Like any other process, befriending takes time. After a year of weekly visitations:
Every elderly that I visit recognise and greet me with a smile.
Some elderly know me by name.
A few elderly even call me "their grandson".

I believe I have made a difference.

Changes in me

Here are some of my personal reflections:

Before volunteering	Now
 <p>"Hi everyone, I'm reporting sick..." – 21 MCs in 2014.</p>	 <p>"I don't have time to get sick!" – 0 MCs in 2015. My conclusion is that volunteering is good for health!</p>
 <p>"Study hard and get a job? Which job? What then?" – I didn't have much direction in life.</p>	 <p>"Definitely counselling or social work!" – I am more aware of what I want to do in the future.</p>
 <p>"Too much free time!" – I didn't have much to do.</p>	 <p>"Here is my monthly schedule." – I no longer have "nothing to do"!</p>
 <p>"This is your fault!" – I tended to blame others for problems, while they remain unsolved.</p>	 <p>"How should we solve this?" – Instead of pointing fingers, I focus on solving the problem.</p>
 <p>"Everything is so easy!" – Some people might have called me arrogant.</p>	 <p>"I'm only 21. What do I know?" – I realised that I might be intelligent, but far from wise.</p>
 <p>"I don't need to think about death yet!" – When I do things, I didn't usually think for the long term.</p>	 <p>"Nothing puts life in sharper perspective than death." – Whenever I can, I try to make a positive difference.</p>
 <p>"I am so fortunate to have all these things that others don't have" – I was taught to be grateful, but by comparing downwards.</p>	 <p>"Youth is wasted on the young." – I can learn so much from my elderly!</p>

The two most important lessons that I learned:

People are people. We are all different, but **everyone just wants to be happy.** After volunteering for a year, I have never seen anyone frown at a smile.



Don't worry, be happy! Life is very simple, but **we may overthink things and lose happiness.** To quote my elderly: *"Why think so much? Eating, sleeping, walking and chatting are enough to be happy!"*

Family

"Ohana means family. Family means nobody gets left behind or forgotten." – Lilo and Stitch

1. My family lead their own lives. We don't meet every week but we do gather during special occasions.



2. Many elderly don't have anyone to visit them at all. I can never replace their real family, but I can provide the next best thing as a befriender.

3. Fellow volunteers are also my family!



Burning out

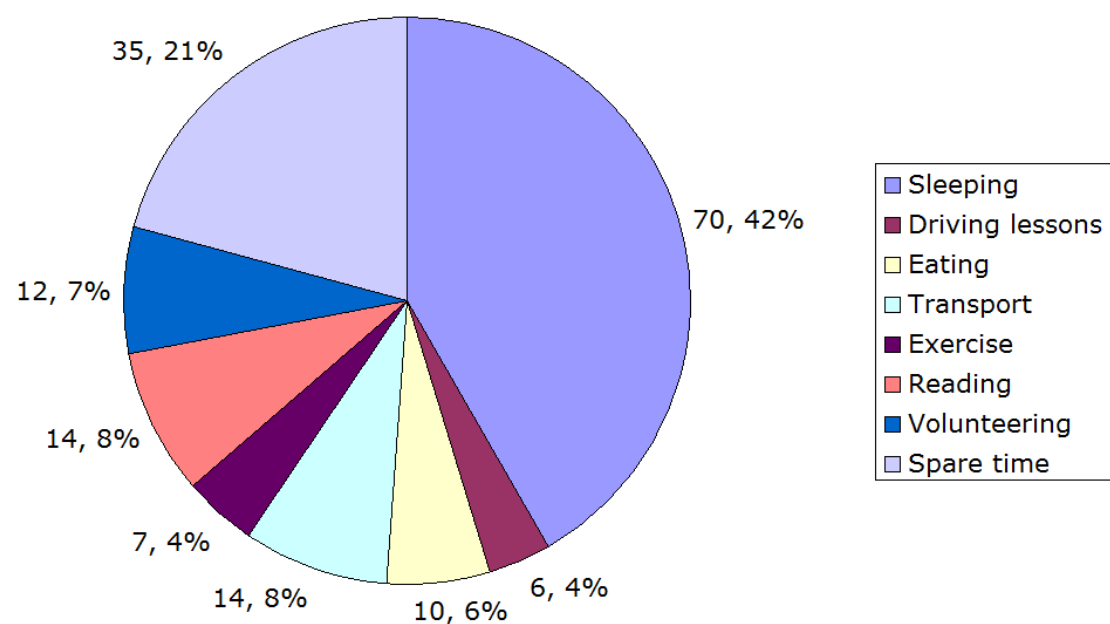
"You cannot serve from an empty vessel." – Eleanor Brownn

I actually did burn out in school. I wrote this to my teachers:

Focusing completely on studies has worked well for the past 5 years, but it is backfiring now. The exams are in 2 weeks, but introducing balance to my life is a bigger priority.

(This was in 2013. In the end, I scored well enough to enter NTU Psychology.)

Average hours spent on activity per week



It is possible to burn out from anything, but 12 out of 168 (7%) hours per week is quite insignificant. Also, my volunteer leaders will stop me before I burn out.

The days I don't feel like volunteering

"Commitment is doing what you said you'd do, long after the mood you said it in has left you." – Anonymous

Here are 2 examples of days I don't feel like volunteering:

During the annual haze, **my energy levels were much lower**. I felt like I was burning out! **So what? It must have been worse for my elderly**. It was even more important to visit them.

Sometimes, **I get demoralised**. It feels like I am alone in caring for the elderly. (This is not true!) **So what? I made a commitment to serve the elderly**. Seeing them smile week after week makes it worth the effort.

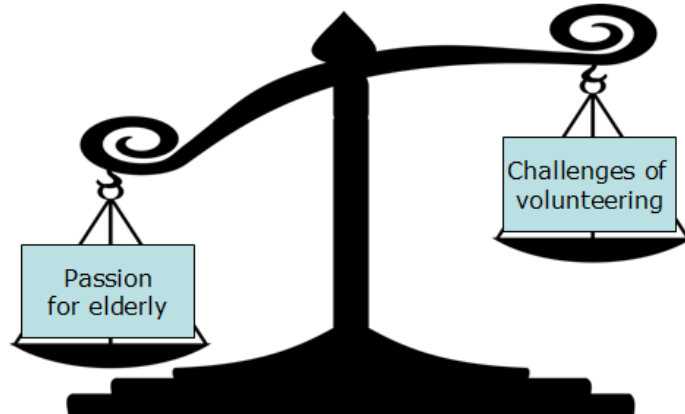
To me, **"commitment" is a bigger factor than "how I am feeling"**.

Section C: Doubts

Here are some doubts that I had when I started volunteering.

Challenges

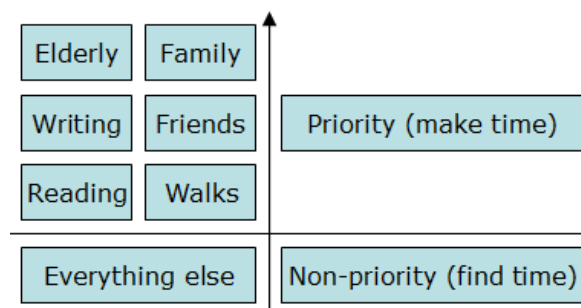
"If the why is big enough, the how becomes easy." – Jim Rohn



I face many challenges	So what?
I can feel overwhelmed with everything happening at the same time.	I plan my schedule two months in advance, so it is actually manageable.
My Mandarin is still below average.	In 5 years it will be above average!
I occasionally wake up with leg cramps.	I force myself out of bed and endure the pain for a few minutes.
My parents get worried about me, just because they are my parents.	I make it a point to get at least 6 hours of sleep a day.
My friends often ask me to join them for dinners or movies.	If I am free, I do, otherwise I ask them to join me for volunteering instead.
People sometimes imply that I could be making better use of my time.	I am not accountable to them. They may never understand why I volunteer.

The only thing that would stop me from volunteering is if I had a crippling disease.
Once you find your passion, most challenges become insignificant.

Other priorities



When I find out about death cases, I reflect: what are my priorities in life? My main priority is being sure that I have brightened other lives. With proper planning, **it is usually possible to volunteer and handle other priorities as well.**

Age barrier

"Age is an issue of mind over matter. If you don't mind, it doesn't matter." – Mark Twain



I am not the youngest, nor the oldest!

Age is irrelevant. I asked some of my volunteer friends at different ages about why they volunteer and the challenges that they face:

David, 67

I try to contribute my experience wherever I can.

Commitment is always an issue. I have my own bucket list to fulfil as well!



Wei Kiang, 53

I volunteer without any specific expectations.

Limited time is always a challenge; regardless, volunteering is my passion, so I still make time for it.



Irene, 49

I volunteer to give back, and I find great joy in giving.

Time is always a challenge, but the smiles on the beneficiaries' faces make every event worthwhile!



Jason, 32

Volunteering for seniors and the intellectually disabled is one of the most meaningful things in my life.

I have other priorities too, but any amount of time put into volunteering is worthwhile!

Kean Yau, 32

Simple seeing the joy on my seniors' faces after each visit makes my day.

I volunteer with an open heart and do not have any particular challenge.

Krishnan, 30

Through volunteering, I've learned so much, made so many friends and witnessed so much joy!

Time and language are definitely challenges, but challenges are meant to be overcome!

Jia Rong, 28

Volunteering allows me to bring joy to those who have been left behind by society!

Language is an issue, and there are limits to what volunteers can do. That doesn't stop me from doing what I can though!

Gui Feng, 22

I was self-absorbed for too long and decided to start volunteering!

I can't join every visitation, but I do what I can when I can!



Su Tong, 22

I volunteer to learn about other people and society in general.

It can be difficult to build close relationships without growing too attached.

Nigel, 24

Serving the elderly who anticipate our visitations week after week brings me joy!

My work is tiring and the schedule is unpredictable, so volunteering can be a challenge. I still do my best to commit anyway!

You don't need to have the energy level of a 20-year-old, or the life experience of a 60-year-old. If you volunteer long enough, you will end up having both.

Language barrier

"The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." – 老子



This is Sandeep. When he joined Lions Befrienders together with me, he could not speak any Mandarin.

Love is a universal language. Sandeep expresses it through handshakes, smiles and laughter. Our elderly sense his sincerity; when he does not join us for visitations, many of them ask where he is.

Sandeep learns new Mandarin phrases monthly. By 2030, he may be able to speak better Mandarin than me!

Sandeep was my role model when I had doubts about the language barrier. I, who can at least speak basic Mandarin, cannot use this excuse.

It does not matter where you start. **Once you find your passion, anything can be learned.**

Focusing on work, and then donating money

"Don't let making a living prevent you from making a life." – John Wooden

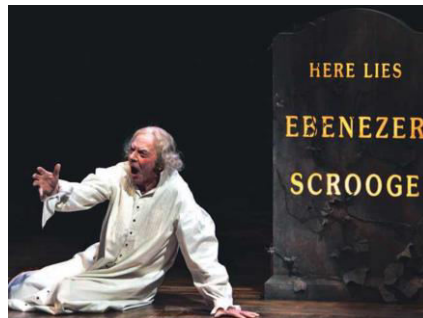


Photo credit:

http://extras.mnginteractive.com/live/media/site36/2015/1210/20151210_031038_Actor-Philip-Pleasants-as-Ebenezer-Scrooge.jpg

How much money is enough? Most elderly that I visit are able to live on \$450 a month. A diploma holder's minimum starting salary is \$1,850. I believe that money is a not real issue for most people.

What Singaporeans need more is joy. Most people I meet are expressionless, or even frowning. Some even ask why I seem to be smiling for no reason. It seems as if they don't understand joy!

There are 4 issues with "focusing on work, and then donating money":

1. Working on weekends would cause burnout.
2. "Work and volunteering" lets me grow more than "work and work".
3. Volunteer organisations need both money and volunteers.
4. If I don't start spreading joy today, when will I start?

One volunteer leader even said this:

"Some people have offered money, said they wanted to do CSR (corporate social responsibility)...But this is not CSR. You and your staff don't even come'."

Beyond basic needs, joy is more important than money.

Finding your passion

Here's a simplified "map" of volunteering (elderly has more details):

Children	Youth	Animals	Elderly	
Family	Community	Volunteering in Singapore	Home help	Befriending
			Healthcare	Outings
			Counselling	Recreational activities
Ex-offenders	Environment	Special needs (Physical)	Special needs (Mental)	

(Yellow = I am here!)

Try out different volunteer events, with different organisations! giving.sg is a great place to start.

Of course, you are also welcome to directly join me for elderly befriending!

Section D: The Future

Here are my future volunteering plans.

University

In NTU, I won't join a CCA. I intend to continue with my existing groups (which I joined for life) once or twice a month.

10 years from now



Marilyn has fibromyalgia. Even with medicine, doing simple things can be painful.

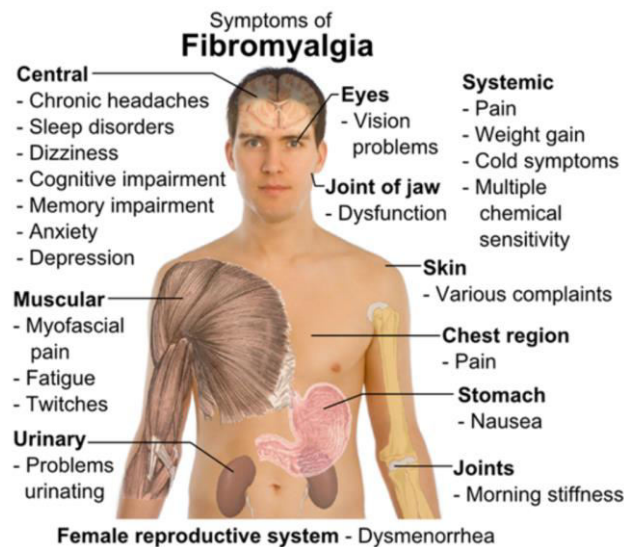


Photo credit: <http://www.synergyandbalance.com/fibromyalgia/>

Marilyn does not even know how long she will live. Why, instead of "enjoying life", has she been leading our team every single week for more than 10 years?

Mandy has 6 growing kids and ageing parents. I doubt if anyone is busier than her. How does she manage to join us for visitations at least twice a month?

Both of them are amazing befrienders, and I feel extremely lucky to be able to learn from them. **In 10 years, I aim to be half the leader that Marilyn is, and half the planner that Mandy is.**

My vision

"If I eat food by myself, I alone 'haha chiou' (laugh). If I share with 20 people, 21 people 'haha chiou'. You see, my joy is multiplied 21 times." – Teresa Hsu

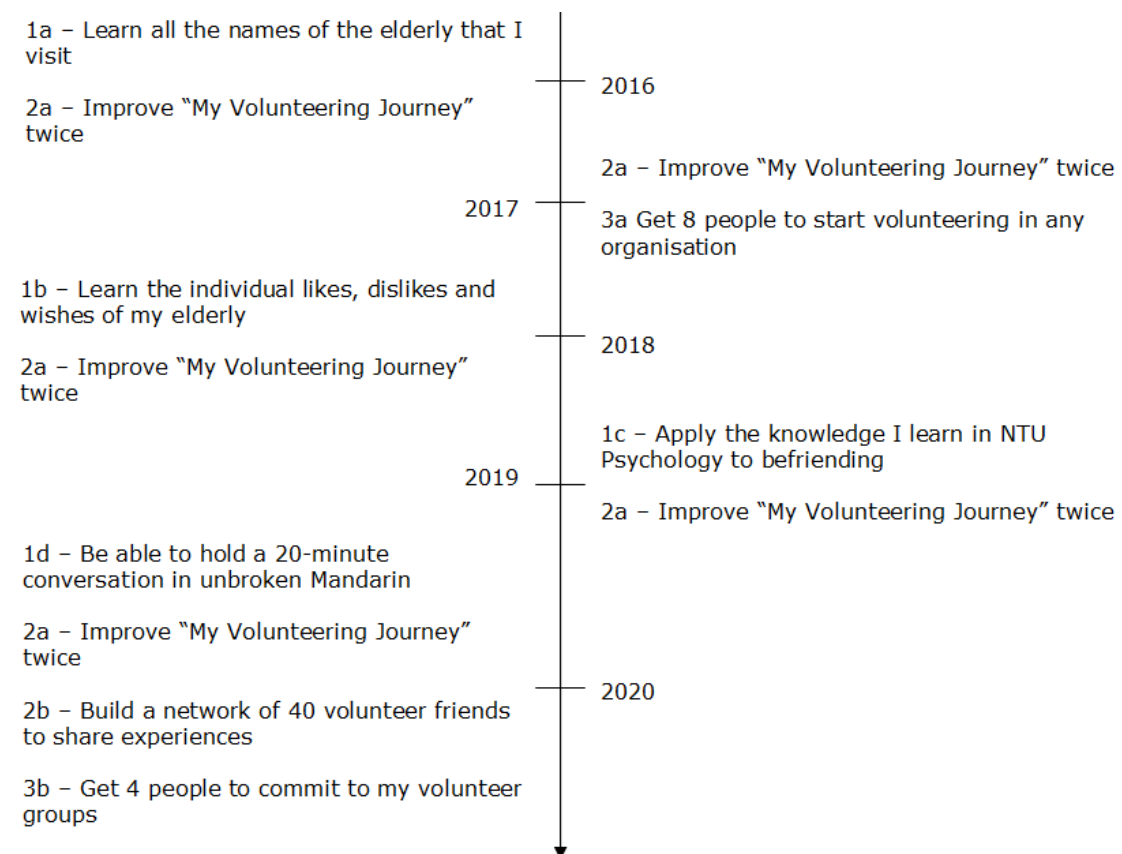


Imagine a world where no one asks "what will I get for helping you?" To me, this world is worth working for!

My plan

"If you fail to plan, you plan to fail!" – Benjamin Franklin

1. Volunteer, and get better at volunteering
2. Share experiences
3. Get more people to volunteer
4. Repeat till vision is achieved



I befriend about 80 elderly every week. There are thousands of elderly throughout Singapore who still don't have anyone to visit them. This is why I am doing my best to volunteer and get more people to volunteer.

Even if I don't change the world, Mother Teresa says: *"If you can't feed a hundred people, then feed just one."*

Acknowledgements

It is important to recognise those who have supported me in this volunteering journey:

Group	Explanation
My parents	I would not have been born without my parents, and they have always provided for me.
Friends/family	They are very supportive and understanding when I volunteer instead of joining them for gatherings.
Fellow befrienders	When I share experiences with fellow befrienders, I am able to reflect and become a better volunteer!
Volunteer leaders	Passion alone is not enough. My leaders provide me with guidance before, during and after every event.
Staff members	Volunteering is not possible without staff members who constantly communicate with other volunteers and organisations.
Elderly	Week after week, reflecting on the stories that my elderly share helps me to become a better person.
Other volunteers	We may volunteer in different organisations, but we all share the same goal of making a difference.
National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (NVPC)	NVPC's calendar (giving.sg) centralises many different volunteering opportunities, so anyone can volunteer!
The government and Voluntary Welfare Organisations	The support provided through these organisations substantially increases quality of life for my elderly.

I hope that you found ***My Volunteering Journey*** useful.

Thank you for reading!