

CREATING A GRATITUDE PRACTICE

If the only prayer you said in your whole life was “thank you” that would suffice.

—Meister Eckert

THE IMPORTANCE OF GRATITUDE

One of the greatest contributing factors to overall happiness and well-being is the amount of gratitude that a person experiences. Gratitude involves noticing and appreciating the positives in life. Gratitude is both (1) an attitude and (2) a practice.

Gratitude is universal and found across all cultures and all people.[1] It is considered a virtue and is different from optimism, hope, and trust. Emmons and McCullough state that the root of the word gratitude is the Latin root *gratia*, which means “grace, graciousness, or gratefulness... all derivatives from this Latin root having to do with kindness, generousness, gifts, the beauty of giving and receiving, or getting something for nothing.”[2]

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH TELL US?

An increasing range of empirical research has found that gratitude can improve a sense of personal well-being in the following two ways:[2,3]

1. As a direct cause of well-being
2. Indirectly, as a means of buffering against negative states and emotions and making us more resilient to stress.

A number of researchers have proposed a theoretical relationship between gratitude and well-being. Experiencing gratitude, thankfulness, and appreciation tends to foster positive feelings, which in turn contributes to one’s overall sense of well-being.[4] Gratitude and positive affect are theorized to benefit physical health directly through improving health behaviors (e.g., improvements in exercise and diet) and biological processes (e.g., improvements in blood pressure, glycemic control), and indirectly through increasing social support and decreasing stress.[5] Gratitude encourages the savoring of positive life experiences and can strengthen social bonds by promoting acts of kindness.[6]

Gratitude interventions are easy-to-deliver and have been linked to a host of psychological, physical, and social benefits, such as:

- Self-reported physical health, engagement in healthy activities, and willingness to seek help for health concerns[7]
- Life satisfaction, mood, positive affect and small effects on depression and anxiety[8,9]
- Higher quality of life and more adaptive health behaviors[10,11]
- More feelings of happiness, pride, and hope[12]

- A greater sense of social connection and cooperation with others—feeling less lonely and isolated[13]
- Helps maintain intimate bonds and is linked to increased prosociality[14,15]
- Increased motivation for self-improvement and positive change[16]
- A reduction in risk for depression, anxiety, and substance abuse disorders[17]
- Alters biomarkers of risk for cardiovascular disease[18]
- Improvement in body image[19]
- Increased acts of kindness, generosity, and cooperation[20,21]
- Resilience in the face of trauma-induced stress, recovering more quickly from illness, and enjoying more robust physical health[22,23]
- Improvement in sleep and energy[24,25]

A meta-analysis found that gratitude interventions are linked to positive outcomes, including happiness, well-being, and life satisfaction.[26] Little of this research, however, has studied gratitude in ethnically diverse samples.

Gratitude may have different implications and manifestations based on cultural background and is a fundamental virtue endorsed by almost all religions of the world.[27] Research that studied gratitude and optimism among Anglo-Americans, Asian Americans, and Indians (living in India) found that Indians not only experienced more positive emotions when practicing gratitude, but also more sadness and guilt.[28] While positive feelings of gratitude may broaden reciprocation, aversive feelings such as indebtedness can possibly lead to narrower forms of reciprocity (like tit-for-tat).[29,30] The intensity and expression of gratitude may vary by culture. One study of Latino/a and East Asian groups in the US found that Latino/a Americans held gratitude in greater esteem and experienced it more intensely and more frequently than East Asian Americans, suggesting that Latino/a experiences and attitudes toward gratitude are closer to those of European Americans.[31] Some research has highlighted that in collectivist cultures versus individualistic ones, expressing gratitude was found to be less effective on well-being because of the sense of indebtedness and embarrassment it can provoke.[31-33] In fact, the sense of self-improvement and personal agency, which were emphasized in writing assignments, increased life satisfaction only in Western individuals.

Conversely, collectivist cultures consider self-focus and individual goals in a less positive way, since they may interfere with the need of the group. Issues of shame and embarrassment have been found to occur when writing and delivering gratitude letters in some cultures.[33] Thus, when working with clients belonging to collectivistic cultures, clinicians should use caution in prescribing writing assignments (such as gratitude and forgiveness letters) that can interfere with clients' relationships within the community they belong to.[34] However, the beneficial effect of writing can be preserved, if the delivery of the letter is not mandatory.[35]

CULTIVATING AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

GRATEFUL CONTEMPLATION EXERCISE 1, ADAPTED FROM RYAN AND COLLEAGUES[37]

Take a few minutes right now to reflect on a happy moment in your own life that stands out for you—a memory that is still strong and has remained with you, even if it happened 10, 20, or 40 years ago. Re-experience it. Visualize the scene, hear the sounds that were around you, feel the sensations in your body. What was it about that experience that stays with you? Was gratitude part of it? What was happening that allowed you to feel grateful? Write down your reflections in the space below:

GRATEFUL CONTEMPLATION EXERCISE 2

We cannot change what life presents. We can, however, choose our attitude in any given circumstance. You can practice consciously choosing to cultivate gratitude with this daily practice:

Practice stopping and having an attitude of gratitude throughout the day. You might incorporate a cue, like sitting down for a meal, hearing an alarm go off, or commuting home, to turn your mind to gratitude. Acknowledge and savor the positive experiences of your day.

List a few cues you can use to remind you to stop and practice an attitude of gratitude:

BENEFITS OF A WRITTEN GRATITUDE PRACTICE

Another way to foster gratitude is to create daily lists of things for which to be grateful. Research has shown health benefits to this written gratitude practice. For example, people who kept gratitude journals on a weekly basis exercised more regularly, reported fewer physical symptoms, felt better about their lives as a whole, and were more optimistic about the upcoming week compared with those who recorded neutral life events or hassles.[2] A daily gratitude journal has been associated with higher positive states of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, attentiveness, and energy. Those who journaled daily about gratitude were also more likely to report helping someone with a personal problem or offering emotional support to another person. Wood and colleagues found that a daily gratitude practice was associated better sleep, more energy, fewer symptoms of illness, and more happiness.[24] Seligman and colleagues discovered that writing about three good things that happened each day and why they happened made people happier and less depressed up to 6 months later.[37]

HOW TO BEGIN A DAILY GRATITUDE JOURNAL PRACTICE

At the end of each day, find a regular time to reflect on the day's events and write down five things that you are grateful for. As you write them down, spend a few moments to reflect on their value to you. This makes it more likely for this practice to boost your mood. Research shows that writing down these things has advantage over just thinking about them.

It is recommended that you get a special journal to record your gratitude list. Some people prefer to use a jar where they store pieces of paper that each have something they are grateful for listed on them. Other people use social media, such as Facebook, to record their daily list. There are also several apps that allow you to record your gratitude-inspiring events, if you would prefer. Your list could include simple everyday things, people in your life, personal strengths or talents, moments of natural beauty, or gestures of kindness from others. Consider reviewing your list once a month or once a year to remind you of the good things in your life.

HOW OFTEN IS IT OPTIMAL TO JOURNAL?

It is recommended to start by journaling daily, but after a while, research shows that *just once a week* is enough to lead to significant changes. Make certain not to overdo it. Writing once or twice a week is more beneficial than daily journaling long-term about gratitude. One study showed that writing once a week for 6 weeks boosted happiness; writing three times a week did not.[38]

EXPRESSING GRATITUDE TO OTHERS

We all have had people who have influenced our lives. The mere act of expressing gratitude has been shown to boost happiness and make us less depressed.

RESEARCH ON ITS EFFECTIVENESS

Seligman and colleagues studied the impact of a gratitude intervention where participants completed a “gratitude visit,” where they wrote and then delivered a letter of gratitude in person to someone who had been especially kind to them but had never been properly thanked.[18] Participants, 1 week after doing the assignment, experienced significantly increased happiness and decreased depression for up to 1 month after they delivered their letters.

ACTION STEPS

Consider doing that exercise yourself. Think about expressing gratitude to someone who has made a difference in your life that you may not have thanked. You might tell them in person, write them a letter, or send them an e-mail describing in detail what they did for you, how it affected your life, and how you often remember their efforts. Be specific about what you are grateful for. It makes the expression of gratitude feel more authentic, for it reveals that you were paying attention to what they did.

INFORMAL PRACTICE

If you find your gratitude practice is getting stale, switch to another format and mix it up a bit to make it work for you. Some other ways to practice gratitude include:

- Pick one co-worker each day and express thanks for what he or she is doing for the organization.
- Go around the dinner table and share one thing each person is grateful for that happened that day.
- Express appreciation about what your partner, child, or friend does and who they are as a person.
- Go for a walk with a friend and talk about what you are most grateful for.
- Do an art project that focuses on your blessings.
- Write a thank you letter to yourself.
- Give thanks for your body.
- Pause to experience wonder about some of the ordinary moments of your life.
- Imagine your life without the good things in it, so as not to take things for granted.

AUTHOR(S)

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