

Increasing Well-Being with Thankfulness & Gratitude

What Is Gratitude?

Gratitude is an expression of appreciation and thankfulness. It is universally regarded as a virtue by most cultures, past and present, and the expression of gratitude is strongly endorsed by Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu theologians and philosophers.

Gratitude has at least three psychological functions: a) a barometer, b) a motive, and c) a reinforcer. As a barometer, the recipients of gratitude discover how cherished they are to others particularly when the giver’s expression of appreciation is intentional, costly and effortful. Unexpected gratitude is much more valuable than gratitude expressed as a matter of routine or ritual. Gratitude can also be a source of motivation. It can motivate reciprocal kindness or incline recipients to be more generative and inhibit retaliation and other negative acts. Finally, as a reinforcer, the expression of gratitude has been shown to increase volunteerism, donations, and other pro-social acts. Apologies for not thanking others can also serve as reinforcers when the kindness of others has been ignored or underappreciated.

Why Become More Grateful?

Grateful people experience more positive emotions, have greater life satisfaction, and are more hopeful about the future. Compared to ungrateful people, highly grateful people are more empathetic, forgiving, and supportive, and less likely to be depressed, anxious and jealous. Ungrateful individuals tend to be more materialistic, where as grateful people abide by the saying “the best things in life are free” enjoying ordinary pleasures like sunsets, good health and simply being alive. People who keep daily diaries on the people, events, and things they are thankful for have been shown to be more optimistic and satisfied with life and less depressed, anxious and fearful than those who obsess on the hassles in their lives.

Three Ways to Increase Gratitude	<i>Caveats & Comments</i>
<p>Daily Thankfulness. In your daily interactions with workers who must meet the public such as clerks, operators, waitresses, and receptionists, attempt to increase the frequency and quality of your thankfulness for their help by being warm and cheerful and saying “thank you” or telling them in other ways how much you appreciate their assistance. If you wish to experiment with this, get a handheld counter (e.g., golf scorer) and count the number of times you say thank you or express gratitude a day before you begin this intervention, during it ,then again a day after the intervention. Go through this 3-day sequence a couple times. Rate your happiness at the end of each day. Note the changes and decide for yourself whether or not it is worth it for you to increase your daily expressions of common gratitude.</p>	<p><i>If you elect to do this intervention, please express gratitude even when you lack the feeling for it but be careful to not become so robotic that your expressions are perceived as hollow or cynical.</i></p> <p><i>Observe the reciprocal power of positive sentiment and how much better you feel for having made another person a little happier.</i></p>

<p>Gratitude Visit. Identify someone in your life who has had a significant impact on you, someone you owe a lot to, but have never properly thanked. Carefully write a short letter to this person revealing your gratitude. Say in detail what the person did to help you and how much it has meant to you. Neatly, by hand, rewrite the letter on quality paper and have it laminated. If possible, visit this person and tell them face-to-face how much you appreciate what they have done for you, thank them once again and give them the letter to keep. If a significant person in your life has died, consider giving the letter to a relative. If you have several people to thank, be patient, spread your good will over several months.</p>	<p><i>If it is not natural for you or easy for you to laminate a letter, skip this instruction. Most people carefully keep hand written letters. Be ready to be moved to tears of joy, the gratitude letter arouses strong positive emotions. However do not expect the effects of this intervention to last more than three weeks unless you repeat it with all the important people on your “must thank” list.</i></p>
<p>Gratitude Diary. At the end of every day for one month write down three things you are thankful for. Make putting entries into your gratitude diary an important routine, like remembering to take vital medicine. Describe people, events, places or things, small or large, that you are thankful for. Certainly some entries may describe the relief of pain or the end of trouble, however, bias your diary toward positive, life affirming experiences. Before you begin this procedure rate your well-being, then again a month later when you are done.</p>	<p><i>Try to seamlessly weave diary writing into your daily routines. If you are comfortable with new technology, use computers, Black Berries, MP3 players, or cell phones, etc. to catalogue your entries. Review your diary, look for patterns and reflect on the positive side of your life. The effects of this intervention are long lasting; you may need to do it only once.</i></p>

References

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