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The Profound Health Benefits of Being Grateful

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Mercola Fact Checked

November 25, 2021

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The ability to experience gratitude to others is a fundamental feature of human cognition
- Positive effects linked to gratitude include social, psychological and physical benefits, which increase the more you make gratitude a regular part of your daily routine
- Gratitude has a positive effect on psychopathology, especially depression, adaptive personality characteristic, positive social relationships and physical health, including stress and sleep
- Those who are grateful have even been found to have a better sense of the meaning of life by being able to perceive good family function and peer relationships
- Two gratitude interventions that you can try in your daily life to promote gratitude include keeping a gratitude journal and expressing gratitude to others, such as by writing thank you notes

Gratitude is a simple practice that can have profound effects on your health and well-being. Its underpinnings are believed to be principles of cooperation that were pivotal in the development of human communication and social reciprocity, and the ability to experience gratitude to others is a fundamental feature of human cognition.[1]

The positive effects linked to gratitude include social, psychological and physical benefits,[2] which increase the more you make gratitude a regular part of your daily routine.

"The limits to gratitude's health benefits are really in how much you pay attention to feeling and practicing gratitude," noted neuroscientist Glenn Fox, Ph.D., a gratitude expert at the University of Southern California. "It's very similar to working out, in that the more you practice, the better you get. The more you practice, the easier it is to feel grateful when you need it."[3]

How Gratitude Changes Your Brain

Gratitude has distinct neurobiological correlates, including in brain regions associated with interpersonal bonding and stress relief.[4] When Fox and colleagues elicited gratitude in 23 female subjects, via stories of survivors of the Holocaust, "ratings of gratitude correlated with brain activity in the anterior cingulate cortex and medial prefrontal cortex," which are associated with moral cognition, value judgment and theory of mind.[5]

Individual differences in proneness to gratitude are also linked to increased gray matter volume in the brain,[6] and it's possible that it elicits long-term changes in your psyche. Fox grew deeply interested in gratitude after his mother's death from ovarian cancer. During her illness, he would send her studies on the benefits of gratitude in cancer patients, and she kept a gratitude journal in her last years.

In one example, 92 adults with advanced cancer engaged in mindful gratitude journaling or routine journaling. After seven days, those who kept a gratitude journal had significant improvements in measures of anxiety, depression and spiritual well-being, such that the researchers concluded "mindful gratitude journaling could positively affect the state of suffering, psychological distress and quality of life of patients with advanced cancer."[7]

"Grateful people tend to recover faster from trauma and injury," Fox told The Pulse. "They tend to have better and closer personal relationships and may even just have improved health overall."[8] When he tried to find gratitude after losing his mother, what he experienced wasn't a quick fix or an immediate route to happiness, but a way to make his grief more manageable in the moment.

As it turns out, grateful writing such as letters of gratitude is a positive psychological intervention that leads to longer term changes in mental health. Among 293 adults who sought out psychotherapy services, those who engaged in gratitude writing reported significantly better mental health after four and 12 weeks than people who did not writing or who wrote about their thoughts and feelings.[9]

Gratitude Boosts Health, Well-Being

Gratitude can be difficult to define, as it has elements of an emotion, a virtue and a behavior, all rolled into one. Robert Emmons, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, and an expert on gratitude, defines it as a two-step process.

As explained in "The Science of Gratitude," a white paper by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley, the two steps include "1) 'recognizing that one has obtained a positive outcome' and 2) 'recognizing that there is an external source for this positive outcome.'"[10]

In this regard, the benefits of gratitude may be gleaned from the actions of other people or experienced in an internalized manner, such as when feeling gratitude about good fate or nature. In this way, gratitude is both a state and a trait.[11]

As a state, it's based on a person's ability to be empathic and elicit grateful emotions that promote prosocial behavior. As a trait, gratitude describes the practice of being grateful, noticing the little things in life and appreciating the positive in the world and other people. Gratitude can be felt both from being helped by others and habitually focusing on the good in your life.

A study published in Clinical Psychology Review found that gratitude has a positive effect on psychopathology, especially depression, adaptive personality characteristic, positive social relationships and physical health, including stress and sleep. What's more, they noted that "the benefits of gratitude to well-being may be causal."[12]

Fox also explained, "Benefits associated with gratitude include better sleep, more exercise, reduced symptoms of physical pain, lower levels of inflammation, lower blood pressure and a host of other things we associate with better health,"[13] including improved resilience.

It's likely that gratitude leads to benefits via multiple mechanisms, not only by improving life satisfaction[14] but also by contributing to an increase in healthy activities and a willingness to seek help for health problems.[15] Those who are grateful have even been found to have a better sense of the meaning of life by being able to perceive good family function and peer relationships.[16]

Gratitude Could Help You Sleep Better, Be Less Materialistic

Gratitude is known to facilitate improvements in healthy eating[17] and benefits depression by enhancing self-esteem and wellbeing.[18] Further, people who are more grateful tend to be:[19]

- Happier
- Less materialistic
- Less likely to suffer from burnout

A 2021 study comparing gratitude and optimism similarly found that both traits were associated with:[20]

Lower heart rate and blood pressure
Better sleep quality
More exercise
Less stress
More positive expectations and reflections
Greater feelings of appreciation toward others

Feeling gracious can help you sleep better and longer, too, perhaps by improving your thoughts prior to sleep. "The relationship between gratitude and each of the sleep variables was mediated by more positive pre-sleep cognitions and less negative pre-sleep cognitions," according to a study in the Journal of Psychosomatic Research.[21]

Those who scored higher on measures of gratitude had better sleep quality and sleep duration and less sleep latency (the amount of time it takes you to fall asleep) and daytime dysfunction. Among adolescents, the simple practice of keeping a gratitude journal significantly reduce materialism while reducing the negative effect of materialism on generosity.[22]

Those who wrote down what they were grateful for donated 60% more of their earnings to charity, for instance. There's good reason to teach children the importance of gratitude, too, as doing so can improve school performance and orient individuals toward a positive life approach.[23]

Positive Gratitude Interventions

Fox likens gratitude to a muscle that must be trained — something that you can practice and become better at over time:[24]

> *"I think that gratitude can be much more like a muscle, like a trained response or a skill that we can develop over time as we've learned to recognize abundance and gifts and things that we didn't previously notice as being important. And that itself is its own skill that can be practiced and manifested over time."*

Rather than a magic bullet, Fox added, it's the regular practice of being grateful that makes a difference: "You know, it's like water cutting rock through a canyon," he said. "It's not done all at once, and it's just steady practice is where you start to get things."[25] Two "gratitude interventions" that you can try in your daily life to promote gratitude include keeping a gratitude journal and expressing gratitude.

With a gratitude journal, you write down lists of what you're grateful for on a regular basis. The behavioral expression of gratitude involves expressing grateful feelings to others, such as by saying thank you or writing gratitude letters, which you then read to the recipients.[26]

Showing gratitude to your partner is also a good way to boost your relationship. In a study of romantic partners, gratitude from interactions was linked to increased connection and satisfaction with the relationship, with researchers suggesting, "gratitude had uniquely predictive power in relationship promotion, perhaps acting as a booster shot for the relationship."[27] Emmons also shared tips for living a more grateful life:[28]

- Remember hard times in your life, which remind you how much you have to be grateful for now. "[T]his contrast is fertile ground for gratefulness," Emmons says.[29]
- Appreciate what it means to be human by tuning into and appreciating your sense of touch, sight, smell, taste and hearing.
- Use visual reminders, including people, to trigger gratitude. This helps to combat "the two primary obstacles to gratefulness," which Emmons cites as "forgetfulness and a lack of mindful awareness."[30]
- Make an oath of gratitude. Simply vowing to be grateful can increase the likelihood that you'll stick to the behavior, so write a note "vowing to count your blessings" and post it somewhere where you'll see it often.

If you want to get started today, keep a notebook by your bedside and make a point to jot down one or two things you're grateful for each night before bed, and express gratitude to others often, such as writing quick thank you notes to friends.

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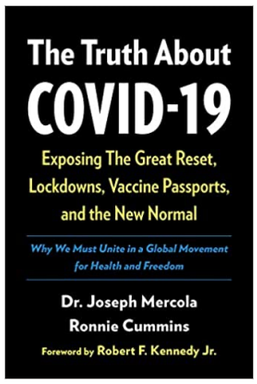

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