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The Power of Gratitude

Taking the time to feel gratitude can have powerful and positive emotional benefits. It can even help your physical health, as shown in an ever-growing body of research.

Practicing gratitude can make you happier, reduce your stress levels, improve your relationships, cause you to be more patient and compassionate, and help you stick to healthy eating and exercise habits. In an amazing way, this single practice can improve many important elements of your wellbeing.

What is gratitude?

At a basic level, gratitude is simply the feeling of being grateful. However, it's deeper and more important than that. Robert Emmons, one of the leading researchers into gratitude and its effects, defines two distinct elements of gratitude. First, it is "the acknowledgment of goodness in one's life." Second, it is the recognition that "the sources of this goodness lie at least partially outside the self" (Emmons, 2007).

So, gratitude is both an appreciation—a reminder to yourself of what's good—and a humble acceptance that those positive aspects of life aren't all your own doing—that you have other people and other forces outside yourself to thank.

Why practice gratitude?

David DeSteno, a leading researcher into the effects of gratitude, sees gratitude as a positive emotion that helps people build better futures for themselves. By practicing gratitude, you unleash a cascade of positive effects—on your emotions, health, relationships, and your ability to adopt healthy behaviors—by increasing your desire to treat others and yourself with care and compassion. While it's possible to use willpower to control negative emotions, suppress self-defeating urges, and behave as people know they should, it can also be exhausting. DeSteno believes that the practice of gratitude leads people to value caring, future-oriented actions in ways that make it easier to act in ways that improve their lives (DeSteno, 2018).

How to Apply the Power of Gratitude

To harness the full power of gratitude, it helps to make a habit of considering what (and who) you are grateful for and taking the time to feel this positive emotion. This is the practice of gratitude. Here are some ways to build more gratitude into your life:

- **Pay attention to the good.** Look for opportunities to be grateful in your daily life. That might be something beautiful you notice—the light in the morning sky, a tree, or a bird. It might be a simple act of civility—another driver making way for you in traffic, help from a coworker, or the generosity of a friend. Look for new, good things every day.
- **Take a moment to savor those good things.** As you get into the habit of noticing the good things in your life, however small they might be, take a moment to savor and appreciate them. Let yourself feel the sensation of gratitude.
- **Build a brief gratitude session into your day.** Take one or two minutes at the start or end of your day to reflect on what you are grateful for—what is good in your life that comes from outside of you. Those might be the gifts of nature, family, friendship, or your religious faith.
- **If you follow a religious practice, learn or create a prayer of gratitude.** Gratitude is a basic tenet of many of the world's religions, and prayer is a way to express and connect with it. Find a gratitude prayer from your spiritual tradition or create a prayer of your own.
- **Keep a gratitude journal.** Write down the things you are grateful for in your life. Add to your list with new entries, trying not to repeat yourself. If you make this a habit, with new entries every week or two, you'll probably find that your feelings of gratitude grow with your expanding list. A blank notebook is all you need. Or you might use one of the many available gratitude apps on your phone.

- **Create a gratitude wall at home, work, or both.** A gratitude wall is a daily activity that helps everyone reflect on what they are grateful for. It is a dedicated space in the family home or workplace where everyone takes time together to reflect on the things they are thankful for and remember them visually. This could include writing on a white board, chalk board, or using sticky notes to add to the wall. A gratitude wall could be used for specific workgroups, team, or company-wide, as well as, at home with your family.
- **Express your thanks to others.** Take the time to thank the people who are, or have been, an important part of your life. Call your mother or father and tell them how much you appreciate them. Thank a friend for being who they are. Thank the people at work who collaborate with you to accomplish something. Write a letter to someone who has made an important difference in your life, letting them know how grateful you are and how their influence has changed you for the better.

For More Information

DeSteno, D. (2018). *Emotional success: The power of gratitude, compassion, and pride*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Where gratitude gets you (interview with David DeSteno) [Audio podcast]. (2020, November 23). Hidden brain. Hidden Brain Media. Retrieved February 16, 2021, from <https://hiddenbrain.org>

Emmons, R. (2007). *Thanks! How the new science of gratitude can make you happier*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Ackerman, C. (2020, January 9). *28 benefits of gratitude & most significant research findings*. Retrieved February 16, 2021, from <https://positivepsychology.com>

Source: Morgan, H. (2021, January 25). *The power of gratitude* (B. Schuette & C. Gregg-Meeker, Eds.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.

Emotional Wellness Month

October 2021

Emotional Wellness Toolkit

How you feel can affect your ability to carry out everyday activities, your relationships, and your overall mental health. How you react to your experiences and feelings can change over time. Emotional wellness is the ability to successfully handle life's stresses and adapt to change and difficult times.

Six Strategies for Improving Your Emotional Health

Brighten your outlook.

People who are emotionally well, experts say, have fewer negative emotions and are able to bounce back from difficulties faster. This quality is called resilience. Another sign of emotional wellness is being able to hold onto positive emotions longer and appreciate the good times.

Here are some tips on developing a more positive mindset:

- Remember your good deeds. Give yourself credit for the good things you do for others each day.
- Forgive yourself. Everyone makes mistakes. Learn from what went wrong, but don't dwell on it.
- Spend more time with your friends. Surround yourself with positive, healthy people.
- Explore your beliefs about the meaning and purpose of life. Think about how to guide your life by the principles that are important to you.
- Develop healthy physical habits. Healthy eating, physical activity, and regular sleep can improve your physical and mental health.

Reduce stress.

Everyone feels stressed from time to time. Stress can give you a rush of energy when it's needed most. If stress lasts a long time, however—a condition known as chronic stress—those “high-alert” changes become harmful rather than helpful. Learning healthy ways to cope with stress can also boost your resilience. Here are some tips to help manage stress:

- Get enough sleep.
- Exercise regularly. Just 30 minutes a day of walking can boost mood and reduce stress.
- Build a social support network.
- Set priorities. Decide what must get done and what can wait. Say no to new tasks if they are putting you into overload.
- Think positive. Note what you've accomplished at the end of the day, not what you've failed to do.
- Try relaxation methods. Mindfulness, meditation, yoga, or tai chi may help.
- Seek help. Talk to a mental health professional if you feel unable to cope, have suicidal thoughts, or use drugs or alcohol to cope.

Get quality sleep.

To fit in everything you want to do in your day, you often sacrifice sleep. However, sleep affects both mental and physical health. It's vital to your wellbeing. When you're tired, you can't function at your best. Sleep helps you think more clearly, have quicker reflexes, and focus better. Take steps to make sure you regularly get a good night's sleep. Here are some tips on getting better quality sleep:

- Go to bed the same time each night, and get up the same time each morning.
- Sleep in a dark, quiet, comfortable environment.
- Exercise daily (but not right before bedtime).
- Limit the use of electronics before bed.
- Relax before bedtime. A warm bath or reading might help.
- Avoid alcohol and stimulants such as caffeine late in the day.
- Avoid nicotine.
- Consult a health care professional if you have ongoing sleep problems.

Be mindful.

The concept of mindfulness is simple. This ancient practice is about being completely aware of what's happening in the present—of all that's going on inside and all that's happening around you. It means not living your life on “autopilot.” Becoming a more mindful person requires commitment and practice. Here are some tips to help you get started:

- Take some deep breaths. Breathe in through your nose to a count of 4, hold for 1 second, and then exhale through the mouth to a count of 5. Repeat often.
- Enjoy a stroll. As you walk, notice your breath and the sights and sounds around you. As thoughts and worries enter your mind, note them, but then return to the present.
- Practice mindful eating. Be aware of taste, textures, and flavors in each bite, and listen to your body when you are hungry and full.
- Find mindfulness resources in your local community, including yoga and meditation classes, mindfulness-based stress-reduction programs, and books.

Cope with loss.

When someone you love dies, your world changes. There is no right or wrong way to mourn. Although the death of a loved one can feel overwhelming, most people can make it through the grieving process with the support of family and friends. Learn healthy ways to help you through difficult times.

Here are some tips to help cope with loss:

- Take care of yourself. Try to eat right, exercise, and get enough sleep. Avoid bad habits—like smoking or drinking alcohol—that can put your health at risk.

- Talk to caring friends. Let others know when you want to talk.
- Find a grief support group. It might help to talk with others who are also grieving.
- Don't make major changes right away. Wait a while before making big decisions like moving or changing jobs.
- Talk to your doctor if you're having trouble with everyday activities.
- Consider additional support. Sometimes short-term talk therapy can help.
- Be patient. Mourning takes time. It's common to have roller-coaster emotions for a while.

Strengthen social connections.

Social connections might help protect health and lengthen life. Scientists are finding that people's links to others can have powerful effects on health—both emotionally and physically. Whether with romantic partners, family, friends, neighbors, or others, social connections can influence our biology and wellbeing.

Here are some tips to build healthy support systems:

- Build strong relationships with your kids.
- Get active and share good habits with family and friends.
- If you're a family caregiver, ask for help from others.
- Join a group focused on a favorite hobby, such as reading, hiking, or painting.
- Take a class to learn something new.
- Volunteer for things you care about in your community, like a community garden, school, library, or place of worship.
- Travel to different places and meet new people.

Source: U.S. National Institutes of Health. (Reviewed 2018, December 10). Emotional wellness toolkit. Retrieved 10 June 2021 from <https://www.nih.gov>

Homework Tips

The following tips may help your child become more organized with his or her homework.

- Schedule a study time into each day to establish a routine. Even if your child does not have homework, the time can be used to read, do crosswords, or other intellectual tasks.
- Create a homework kit that includes all of the supplies that may be needed to complete the assignments.
- If your child constantly forgets to bring home their books, request an extra set to keep at home.
- Help your child determine in what order they will do the assignments. When finished, review the assignments together.
- Help your child break the assignments into smaller chunks so goals feel attainable. Allow your child frequent, small breaks.
- Minimize distractions such as television and radio. Soothing sounds, like ocean waves or rainfall, may help your child focus or block out distracting sounds.
- Only allow one assignment or project to be in front of your child at a time. Other papers or books lying around can distract, discourage and overwhelm.
- If the homework is a reading assignment, have your child read aloud to you. Or, alternate reading pages or paragraphs with him/her to keep your child focused.
- Helping your child with homework is appropriate, but make sure you are not doing the work.
- Work with your child's teacher to develop an organization system that enables you to offer ongoing support and monitoring.
- Purchase a homework planner to help your child record assignments. Ask the teacher to sign it each day to be sure all assignments are accounted for.

Workplace Options. (Reviewed 2018). Homework tips. Raleigh, NC: Author.