

Got Gratitude?

How often do you feel excited about the fact that you can see this page? Or that you can go to a grocery store and buy lettuce at 9:00 pm? Or that you live in a place where it's relatively safe to hold your lover's hand in public? Unless you recently had an experience when these things weren't possible, you probably take them for granted. Most people do. Our brains are designed to adapt quickly to positive experiences. This leaves us continually feeling dissatisfied when the newness of an experience wears off and pushes us to constantly look for the next good thing whether it's the newest iwatch, car, partner or intoxicating experience.

We can ward off this adaptation process and the chronic dissatisfaction that comes with it by practicing gratitude. In the process, practicing gratitude provides many other physical, emotional and social benefits*. People who practice gratitude have stronger immune systems, fewer aches and pains, lower blood pressure, more time spent exercising, better attention to one's health, and longer, more refreshing sleep. Doing a gratitude practice leads to higher levels of positive emotions, less anxiety and depression, less self-blame, greater self-worth, more joy and pleasure, and more optimism and happiness. Practicing gratitude also helps limit suicidal thinking, lowers the incidence of eating disorders, and reduces the likelihood of becoming dependent on drugs, alcohol and nicotine. And, among people who have experienced trauma, having a grateful mindset leads to less post-traumatic stress. Finally, gratitude has been shown to strengthen marriages and friendships and improve job performance. People who are grateful also tend to feel less lonely and isolated and are rated as much more likeable than ungrateful people.

Why does gratitude work?

Robert Emmons, one of the leading experts in the psychology of gratitude, defines gratitude as "the feeling of reverence for things that are given." "Given" is the key. When we are grateful, we acknowledge that we've been given something or have been the recipient of good fortune. This implies a giver. This giver could be a fellow being doing something for you – like your lover making you pancakes for breakfast, your dog showering you with love and affection, or a stranger who's smile makes your day. Or it could be, depending on your spiritual beliefs, a supernatural being or nature creating the spectacular double rainbow after a rainstorm or creating the complex human body that has the ability to see the beauty of a rose or feel our lover's hand. Being grateful also involves letting go of the notion that we are totally responsible for all the good that comes our way and allows us to recognize how people have helped us get through challenging times and/or helped us succeed. Being grateful requires us to be humble and acknowledge the opportunities we've gotten in life because of other people's efforts, support or challenges. Gratitude pushes us to acknowledge the brave, outspoken LGBT heroes who fought for our rights, our families who gave us what they could, a teacher or mentor who saw our capabilities and encouraged us, or a bully who's taunting pushed us to do something great.

Another way gratitude works is that it shifts our focus away from our problems and onto things that feel more positive. At the same time, being grateful turns up the volume of good things. When you are feeling grateful for the sunshine you feel it more intensely than you do if you take it for granted.

Gratitude also has significant impacts on our brain chemistry. When we experience gratitude, our brains release a rush of dopamine making us feel great.

Jump Start an Attitude of Gratitude

The key to practicing gratitude is to do it intentionally. One of the easiest ways to do this is to keep a gratitude journal and write in it one to three times a week. Don't just do this in your head. Write it out. Be as specific as possible about what you are grateful for and describe it in detail. It's also good to acknowledge the giver whether it's nature or a supernatural being, or a person or animal. Try this for three months and see what happens.

*See for example work by Robert Emmons, Mike McCullough, Alex Wood, Christina Karns, and Louis Alloro. You can also find a number of articles and exercises on Gratitude on the Greater Good website: <http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/>

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