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Power, Happiness and Health - All possible with gratitude

When one of the most powerful men in the world gave a keynote speech in front of the Democratic National Convention in 2004, as a candidate for the Illinois Senate seat, he started off by expressing his deep gratitude for the "privilege" of addressing the convention. And at the Democratic National Convention in 2008, when he accepted the nomination for presidency, his first remark was that he accepted the nomination with "profound gratitude and great humility." That person was President Barack Obama.

Certainly, gratitude is not in any way a weakness. No, in fact, it is a strength. It is also a virtue emphasized in all the major religions. And it just plain feels good.

We all know that when people do good things for us, it's likeable to recognize and appreciate those things – just as it feels good when others appreciate our efforts for them. Besides being a likeable trait, people who are grateful tend to be happier and cope better with life's ups and downs.

A personal challenge may be to self-reflect on your own level of gratitude in life. How so? People who are grateful think and speak different. Their "language" is different, says Robert Emmons, PhD, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, and author of *Thanks! How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier*. Dr. Davis, who has been researching the subject of gratitude for 12 years, explains that grateful people see themselves and even life itself as full of gifts, givers, blessings, fortune and abundance. In contrast, the ungrateful tend to focus on words or language describing deprivation, deservingness, regrets, lack, need, scarcity and loss. "So, the trick is to watch one's language," said Dr. Emmons.

"I believe that gratitude is the best approach to life. When life is going well, it allows us to celebrate and magnify the goodness. When life is going badly, it provides a perspective by which we can view life in its entirety," added Dr. Emmons. "People who live under an 'aura of pervasive thankfulness' reap the rewards of grateful living; conversely, those who fail to feel gratitude cheat themselves out of their experience of life. And why would we want to cheat ourselves?"

If anything, gratefulness should be something experienced more than just once a year on a day in November. Thanksgiving, or recognizing and expressing all you are grateful for, is something you can do, and benefit from, each and every day.

Chat with an expert... Robert Emmons, PhD, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis:

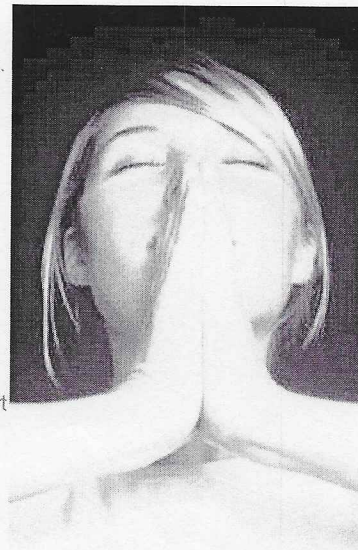
Q. It may seem more natural to count one's blessings when things are going well. But, your research papers seem to show that being grateful can help people through trauma and with coping with life in general. How can someone shift from a limiting thought process to one of gratitude?

A. It may seem more natural, but in actuality some loss or adversity makes people more keenly aware of what they have to be grateful for. It is essential that we make the distinction between feeling grateful and being grateful. Of course no one "feels" grateful that they have lost a job or a home or their physical mobility due to aging or injury. The latter is a choice, a prevailing attitude that endures and is relatively immune from gains and losses. But it is better if the attitude has been cultivated prior (for example, through a shift in perceived reality reflected in language); then the person has a built-in psychological immune system to cushion them. There is evidence that grateful people are more resilient to stress in general, whether we are talking minor everyday hassles or major personal upheavals. A grateful stance toward life is relatively immune to both fortune and misfortune. Furthermore, trials and suffering can actually refine and deepen gratefulness.

Q. Just like making an exercise habit stick, gratitude seems to work best when it becomes a habitual part of life. What can someone do today to start making the change toward an attitude of gratitude?

A. Start today. Begin the practice. Journal for gratitude. It does not matter whether you begin each day journaling or make a list of things you are grateful for at the end of the day. There is no one right way to do it. You don't need to buy a fancy personal journal to record your entries in, or worry about spelling or grammar. The important thing is to establish the daily habit of paying attention to gratitude-inspiring events.

I also recommend that when people identify, in their daily journal, those elements in life for which they are grateful, to consider them "gifts" and to make the conscious effort to associate each with the word gift. Be aware of your feelings and how you "relish"



and "savor" this gift in your imagination. Take the time to be especially aware of the depth of your gratitude. In other words, we tell people not to hurry through this exercise as if it were just another item on their to-do list. Gratitude journaling is really different from merely listing a bunch of pleasant things in one's life.

Q. In one of your research papers, I found it interesting to learn that people who kept journals of their thoughts did not have the same benefits as those who kept journals focusing specifically on what they were grateful for. Is the benefit derived from keeping one's focus on what is good in life versus ruminating over the circumstances they face? And if so, what does that say for certain forms of psychotherapy?

A. Traditionally, therapy has been a place where you go to talk about your troubles. The positive psychology movement suggests that this is only half the function of therapy. A focus on building strengths (such as gratitude) should also be the focus of therapeutic activities. Gratitude is especially effective as it is the quintessential positive trait; it involves a positive view of self, a positive view of others and a positive view of the world.

Q. What has your research shown about the health effects of gratitude in terms of anxiety, depression, self-esteem and overall happiness? Can gratitude affect overall wellness and health?

A. Yes, there is good evidence that positive thinking in the form of gratitude can help alleviate depression, prevent depression from recurring, and reduce the risk of lifetime episodes of depression. For example, grateful recipients of benevolence feel better about themselves. They feel esteemed and validated when they perceive that another person has provided them with assistance. This enhancement of self-worth can itself drive out feelings of depression by reducing feelings of hopelessness (itself a core feature in sustaining depression). By feeling grateful, we are acknowledging that someone, somewhere, is being kind to us. And therefore not just that we are worthy of kindness (versus everyone else) but that kindness indeed exists in the world and, therefore, that life may be worth living.

One of the reasons gratitude makes us happier is that it forces us to abandon a belief that may accompany severe depression: that the world is devoid of goodness, love and kindness and is nothing but randomness and cruelty. A critical element in gratitude is the recipient's acknowledgment that the gift was given out of compassion, generosity, kindness and/or love (and often, but not always, selflessness – always at least, though, some effort or loss or energy spent by the giver).

Repeated patterns of perceived benevolence may lead the depressed person to reorganize his or her self-schema ("I guess I'm not such a loser after all."). I focused on depression here as an example; such thinking might also combat anxiety-related disorders.

Q. Could you speak about the importance of gratitude when it comes to the majority of religions or spiritual practices?

A. Certainly. Gratitude is at the core of all the major religions. Since the beginning of time, people who have worshiped a God or gods have found ways to express gratitude toward that God(s). Virtually every religion has emphasized gratefulness or thanksgiving. It is part of the ethical foundations of world religions which state that people are morally obligated to give thanks to their God and to each other. Religion provides an ultimate ground for thankfulness and teachings and traditions to guide one's practices. In contemplative traditions, gratitude is the first, most important step on the spiritual journey. An attitude of gratitude, practiced often enough, helps us find God in all things and can transform the way we look at our life and other people.

Two examples: In traditional Judaism, there is a custom of reciting 100 blessings a day. Thankfulness for everything is appropriate in Judaism because all things come from God in the Hebrew worldview, and therefore Jewish life is filled with this recognition. A prayer is said upon hearing good or bad news, and God is praised for everything. In this way, a divine perspective on life is kept. In Christianity, gratitude is the core of the gospel – thanks be to God for his indescribable gift of Jesus Christ! There are over 150 references to thankfulness in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament scriptures.

Q. Can you explain the concept of transcendence, what that is, and how gratitude fits into transcendence?

A. Transcendence is a state of expansion beyond the self and a connection with that which is larger than the self. Transcendence provides the foundation of gratitude in a spiritual context that is often devoid of traditional religious framework. When I am grateful I recognize that I am part of a larger story, framework or existence in which I become aware of my relatedness to the web of creation of all living things.

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