

## **5 WAYS TO MAKE GRATITUDE A PART OF YOUR EVERYDAY LIFE**

*“Acknowledging the good that you already have in your life is the foundation for all abundance.”* - Eckhart Tolle

The emphasis of gratitude on mental health is wide in terms of its influence in benefiting and improving one's state of mental health and well being. WHO states realising one's potential, the ability to cope with normal life stresses and community contributions as core components of mental health. Other definitions expand further including intellectual, emotional and spiritual development, positive self-perception, feelings of self-worth and physical health, and intrapersonal harmony.

*Gratitude* can be defined as, “A habitual focusing on and appreciating the positive aspects of life” (Van Dusen, Tiarniyu, Kashdan, & Elhai, 2015; Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). Gratitude is considered a positive psychological trait, being an orientation towards the positive aspects in the world (Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley, & Joseph, 2008). Since the inception of positive psychology, it has influenced various disciplines, including education, health care, and economics. Positive psychology interventions have accumulated evidence of their effects on mental health and well-being. In recent years, positive psychology interventions have also been introduced in the occupational health field. A meta-analysis conducted in 2019 demonstrated their effectiveness in improving areas of work-related outcomes, including job stress, engagement, and organizational pro-social behaviour. Gratitude is understood to have emerged from the study of positive psychology as a multidimensional concept involving an emotion, a personality trait, or a coping response.

Expressing and feeling gratitude towards someone or something external has been shown to have interpersonal benefits, as many studies over the years have found that people who consciously count their blessings tend to be happier and less depressed. In one such study conducted in 2015 to understand if gratitude writing could help the mental health of psychotherapy clients, it was seen that participants in the gratitude condition reported significantly better mental health than those in the expressive and control conditions. Gratitude is also understood to be important for social and emotional health. Behavioral and psychological research have also shown the surprising life improvements that can stem from the practice of gratitude.

Emmons and McCullough (2003) examined the effect of gratitude on psychological and physical well-being and found that giving thanks makes people happier and more resilient; it strengthens relationships, reduces stress, improves health and also enhances self-worth in individuals (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006b; Toepfer & Walker, 2009). Gratitude is also incongruous with negative emotions and may even mitigate the presence of negative feelings, such as greed, envy, or anger (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). In addition to gratitude's positive effects on positive emotions and subjective well-being in adults, it has been found through clinical trials that gratitude can lower blood pressure and improve immune functions (Emmons, 2014; Emmons & Stern, 2013). Therefore, proving: the greater the gratitude, the better the health (Singh, Khan, & Osmany, 2014). In addition, the studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that for those with high levels of gratitude, COVID-19 protective self-efficacy was associated with lower depressive symptoms over time. (Ang, J. Y.-Z., Monte, V., & Tsai, W. (2022).

In the history of human civilization, gratitude has always been an integral part of all our cultures and societies. Today, we thoroughly understand gratitude's importance in promoting psychological and physiological well-being (Wood et al., 2009). This insight was aided partially by advances in neuroscience, which helped us discover what happens within the brain when people feel and express gratitude. While numerous studies show the brain regions that are active when people experience gratitude (Fox et al., 2015; Kini et al., 2016; Zahn et al., 2009), we will take a closer look at the neurotransmitters involved when the brain is in a state of gratitude. Neurotransmitters are chemical messengers in your nervous system that carry information from one nerve cell to the next target cell. When we experience and express gratitude there is an increased activity of two important neurotransmitters in the brain: Dopamine and Serotonin.

Dopamine is often referred to as the “feel-good” hormone because it is very much involved in our sensation of pleasure as part of the brain's reward system. It plays a crucial role in maintaining and regulating attention, motivation, movement, emotional responses, and learning. Research studies have shown that when we express gratitude there is a rush of dopamine in the brain (Zahn et al., 2008b). This allows us to feel a natural high thereby promoting and increasing the duration of positive feelings and emotions. In addition to increasing dopamine, gratitude has also been associated with increased serotonin production.

Serotonin is often called the “happiness” chemical because it contributes to feelings of well-being, stabilizes our mood, and helps us feel more relaxed (Lechner, 2022). Hebb’s Law in neuroscience says that “neurons that fire together wire together.” Hence by practicing gratitude every day, we can strengthen the neural pathways that release these neurotransmitters and create long-lasting positive states of mind within ourselves.

Gratitude is foundational to well-being throughout life. It is not only a key to improve our subjective well being and a powerful vaccine against depression, stress, anxiety, fear and many other mental health issues, but also helps improve both intra and interpersonal relationships and promote healthy relations. One of the major benefits from practicing gratitude is that ‘gratitude leads to happiness’ not vice versa because all of us want to be happy and many would think that if you are happy, you would be grateful. But can we really say that happy people are grateful? We know quite a number of people who have many things that can make them happy but are not happy in life, while we also know of some who experience misfortune yet radiate joy and happiness. The reason in simple terms is that they are grateful. So, it’s not happiness that makes us grateful but gratefulness that makes us happy.

The practice of gratitude enables us to be grateful for everything and every moment. It’s true that you cannot be grateful for everything at all times, for example, you can’t be grateful for losing something or someone dear to us, but we can choose to be grateful for every moment of our lives. Here are 5 exercises to make gratitude a part of your everyday life:

1. **Gratitude Journaling-** note down what you’re grateful for, in ways that works best for you (eg: write, type, draw) and take some time to reflect on it’s impact on you and your life. If done consistently, this helps in reducing depressive symptoms, improves sleep and increases emotional balance
2. **Atomic Gratitude** - we can’t be grateful for everything but can be grateful in every moment. Being grateful for the small things in life (eg: I’m grateful that I’m alive today)
3. **Gratitude Trail** - appreciate the infinite number of things and people you can be grateful for that’s usually not acknowledged

4. **Gratitude Scan-** David Steindl-Rast in his talk, gives a simple yet very powerful technique to practice gratitude in one's life. 'Stop- Look-Go'. In this racing world, where we take many things for granted, it's very important to stop for good and look around, count our blessings one by one by acknowledging, and go forward with a sense of gratitude.
5. **Gratitude Affirmations-** Making affirmation of all that you can be grateful for as affirmations are powerful tools that reframe our mindset. Gratitude affirmations guide our mind to think gratefully.

What works for some people may not work for others. To find your best method, "really think about what feels right and what feels natural or meaningful to you," says Sonja Lyubomirsky, a professor of psychology at the University of California who studies happiness and gratitude.

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