

Gratitude

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November begins the transition to the end of the year. Especially for those of us living in northern locales, this transition is felt not only by the march along the calendar, but viscerally as a change in the season: the verdant exuberance of summer has come to an end, even nature's autumnal color display has succumbed to the inevitable and withered away. While this can feel bleak, November is the month that we celebrate Thanksgiving – a time for reflection, gathering, and (as the name implies), gratitude, gratefulness, and thankfulness.

Gratitude can be a difficult emotion to conjure up. Many of us are burnt out – as are the colleagues and staff that we work alongside. All that has occurred in the last few years can be unnerving even just to think about. However, experts tell us that it is in times like these when emotions feel unbalanced that focusing on gratitude can be the most helpful. Indeed, while we don't have to be thankful for everything that comes our way, we can find thanks, appreciation, and gratitude in every moment. Below is a definition of gratitude, some key points on why gratitude is important, and some simple ways we practice gratitude.

Gratitude is roughly defined as general practice of expressing thanks and acknowledging the goodness in life, even in times of challenge and change [1,2]. When gratitude wells up in us, this emotion is gratefulness, and when gratefulness results in actions or words of thanks that is spread among others, this is thanksgiving [3].

If you need no other reason, being grateful is felt to be the root of happiness, as increased gratefulness is strongly associated with greater happiness: Positive psychology research tells us that gratitude and giving thanks “helps people feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve their health, deal with adversity, and build stronger relationships” [1] Essentially, it is difficult to hold both gratefulness and unhappiness within us. So, when you focus on what you are thankful for, you are more likely to feel positive emotions – and by default let go of some of the negative.

Gratitude also

- decreases impatience
 - has a positive impact on our mental and emotional states
 - increases optimism
 - improves physical health
 - increases altruistic behaviors
 - is associated with improved physical health and habits, such as exercising
 - fosters friendships
 - allows you to bounce back from stress
- [3]

Gratitude is a muscle. It requires practice to perform optimally. Some strategies to increase your focus on gratitude include [1,4]:

- Gratitude journal – write of 1-3 things you were grateful / thankful for each day. The simple act of writing makes the act more real, reinforces the positive experiences, and is associated with fostering happiness and wellbeing
- Begin the day with intention – start each day by thinking about all that you appreciate
- Give continuous attention – through the day find small things that you appreciate or are thankful for
- Share gratitude – give positive feedback, provide random acts of kindness
- Write thank you notes (or emails)
- Meditate

References:

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