

GRATITUDE

Gratitude is an emotion similar to appreciation, and positive psychology research has found neurological reasons why so many people can benefit from this general practice of expressing thanks for our lives, even in times of challenge and change.

To begin though, we need to define what we mean by “gratitude.”



What is Gratitude?

Many of us express gratitude by saying “thank you” to someone who has helped us or given us a gift. From a scientific perspective, however, gratitude is not just an action: it is also a positive emotion that serves a biological purpose.

Positive psychology defines gratitude in a way where scientists can measure its effects, and thus argue that gratitude is more than feeling thankful: it is a deeper appreciation for someone (or something) that produces longer lasting positivity.

There are more than 10 Definitions, but I personally prefer this one.

The Harvard Medical School provides more detail, writing that gratitude is:

“a thankful appreciation for what an individual receives, whether tangible or intangible. With gratitude, people acknowledge the goodness in their lives ... As a result, gratitude also helps people connect to something larger than themselves as individuals—whether to other people, nature, or a higher power”

Two Stages of Gratitude

According to Dr. Robert Emmons, the feeling of gratitude involves two stages (2003):

1. First comes the acknowledgment of goodness in one's life. In a state of gratitude, we say yes to life. We affirm that all in all, life is good, and has elements that make worth living, and rich in texture. The acknowledgment that we have received something gratifies us, both by its presence and by the effort the giver put into choosing it.
2. Second, gratitude is recognizing that some of the sources of this goodness lie outside the self. One can be grateful to other people, to animals, and to the world, but not to oneself. At this stage, we recognize the goodness in our lives and who to thank for it, ie., who made sacrifices so that we could be happy?

The two stages of gratitude comprise the recognition of the goodness in our lives, and then how this goodness came to us externally lies. By this process, we recognize the luck of everything that makes our lives—and ourselves—better.



Purpose of This Emotion



People can use gratitude to form new social relations or to strengthen current ones.

Acts of gratitude can be used to apologize, make amends and help solve other problems.

Alternatively, people may feel gracious because it can be an intrinsically rewarding process. Simply being grateful for being alive is a great way to motivate oneself to seize the day.

The idea that tomorrow is not guaranteed is a strong motivator for some people to be their “best self” today.

Why Gratitude Works

Gratitude is a selfless act. Its acts are done unconditionally, to show to people that they are appreciated. “A gift that is freely given” is one way to understand what these acts are like.

For example, if someone is sad and you write them a note of appreciation, you are likely not asking for something in return for this person; instead, you are reminding them of their value, and expressing gratitude for their existence. At the moment, you are not waiting for a “return note” from this person.

Even when we do not expect a return, sometimes they happen. Gratitude can be contagious, in a good way. In the previous example, maybe when you are down, this person will write you a note too.

Here are two processes gratitude can influence:

1. Catharsis

Catharsis is the process in which an individual releases strong emotions.

For example, after a stressful or traumatic event, crying provides a means for such a strong release, rendering the activity cathartic. Catharsis works with gratitude.

To illustrate this, consider the guilt associated with “failing” to meet obligations. Perhaps in this situation, you would express gratitude to who you let down, in an attempt to release that guilt. The acts are meant to convey the appreciation that the friends possess, despite a recent disappointment.



Additionally, possessions from passed loved ones may provide a sense of serenity that enables the new owner to reflect with gratitude on that object and in essence, that person.

The use of gratitude serves as an agent of catharsis, where both parties feel satisfied in the end.

2. Reciprocity

Reciprocity, as a concept from social psychology, is about the exchanging of actions.

In this case, it is about the exchange of positive emotion. When someone performs an act of gratitude for another person, in turn, that person may be motivated to do something gracious for the former person or continue the favor for a stranger.

Imagine having coffee or a meal with a friend, and they politely demand to pay for the outing. You may quibble back and forth about splitting the bill, but should they insist, you are likely to feel grateful, and an extended duty that the next meal is “your treat.”

Religious and Spiritual Perspectives on Gratitude

Unsurprisingly, religious and spiritual movements have explored gratitude too. Theravāda Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are some of the main religions with writings on this (Berkwitz, 2003; Emmons & Crumpler, 2000).

Historically, many religions referred to gratitude strictly regarding the need to be thankful for a higher power. More so, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism stressed gratitude as an integral step on the path to a good life.

For example, in Judaism, followers of Yahweh are encouraged to start every day by being grateful for waking up again (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). Some psychologists believe that Christianity, as another example, incorporates a “gratitude to God” that binds many Christians together (Roberts, 1991).



For Islam, the purpose of the five daily prayers is not to ask Allah for anything, but instead, to show gratitude towards Allah (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). These three religions offer a unique role of gratitude, and overall, one of thanks for this existence and who created it.

In the older writings of Theravāda Buddhism, gratitude connects practitioners to their pasts (Berkwitz, 2003). Today, gratitude and the concept of karma is a driving force behind philanthropic Buddhism in China (Kuah-Pearce, 2014). Like Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, gratitude plays a unique role in Buddhism historically and presently.

Several recent studies explore the relationship between religious gratitude (such as gratitude to a higher power) and well-being (Kraus et al., 2015; Krause & Hayward, 2015; Van Cappellen et al., 2016). This is a burgeoning area of research in the field of positive psychology.

Modern Psychological Perspectives on Gratitude

More recently, positive psychology has expanded research on the importance of gratitude, largely led by researcher Robert Emmons.





Here is an overview of nine recent psychological findings related to the study of gratitude:

1. Enhanced Well-being

Expressing your thanks can improve your overall sense of well-being. Grateful people are more agreeable, more open, and less neurotic (McCullough et al., 2002; McCullough, Tsang, & Emmons, 2004; Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley, & Joseph, 2008; Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley et al., 2008).

Furthermore, gratitude is related inversely to depression, and positively to life satisfaction (Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2008). This is not to say that “depressed people” should simply be more grateful, as depression is a very complicated disease and struggle for millions of people. Instead, perhaps gratitude practices need to be a part of the therapy and treatment for people who struggle with depression.

2. Deeper Relationships

Gratitude is also a powerful tool for strengthening interpersonal relationships. People who express their gratitude for each other tend to be more willing to forgive others and less narcissistic (DeShea, 2003; Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998).

Giving thanks to those who have helped you strengthens your relationships and promotes relationship formation and maintenance, as well as relationship connection and satisfaction (Algoe et al., 2008; Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010).

3. Improved Optimism

Dr. Emmons and Dr. McCullough did a study in 2003 exploring the impact of practicing gratitude. After 10 weeks, their research conveys that people who focused on gratitude showed more optimism in many areas of their lives, including health and exercise.

When people are optimistic about their well-being and health, they may be more likely to act in ways that support a healthy lifestyle.

4. Increased Happiness

Toepfer, Cichy, and Peters (2011) conducted a study asking people to write and deliver a letter to someone for whom they were grateful. After the task, their happiness levels and life satisfaction were dramatically impacted—even weeks later.

In the pursuit of happiness and life satisfaction, gratitude offers a long-lasting effect in a positive-feedback loop of sorts. Thus, the more gratitude we experience and express, the more situations and people we may find to express gratitude towards.



5. Stronger Self-Control

Self-Control helps with discipline and focus. Long-term well-being can benefit from self-control, for example, resisting nicotine in cigarettes for someone who is trying to quit smoking. Self-control helps us stick to the “better choice” for our long-term health, financial future, and well-being.

Being thankful can provide us the resolve we need to make choices in our lives that serve us, emotionally and physically, in the long-run. As this study highlights, there are so many applications to using gratitude as a path towards healthier humans and communities.



6. Better Physical and Mental Health

Research performed in 2015 showed that patients with heart failure who completed gratitude journals showed reduced inflammation, improved sleep, and better moods; this reduced their symptoms of heart failure after only 8 weeks.

The link between the mind-body connection aligns with how gratitude can have a double benefit. For example, the feeling of appreciation helps us to have healthier minds, and with that healthier bodies.

7. An Overall a Better Life

Over the last two decades, the evidence supporting the benefits of gratitude has increased a lot.

Consider this quote from the Wall Street Journal's article "Thank you, No, Thank you."

"...adults who feel grateful have more energy, more optimism, more social connections and more happiness than those who do not, according to studies conducted over the past decade. They're also less likely to be depressed, envious, greedy or alcoholics." – Melinda Beck

Aside from increasing well-being, psychology research shows how practicing gratitude, in this case, gratitude towards a higher power, can reduce levels of stress (Krause, 2006). Practicing gratitude can decrease levels of depression and anxiety (Kashdan & Breen, 2007).



8. Stronger Athleticism

Studies from researcher Lung Hung Chen found that an athlete's level of gratitude for their success can influence their levels of well-being (Chen, 2013; Chen & Wu, 2014). More specifically, adolescent athletes who are more grateful in life are also more satisfied and tend to have higher levels of self-esteem.

Gratitude also affects sports fans (Kim & Jeong, 2015; Kim et al., 2010). Fans' levels of gratitude influence their happiness, connection, and identity with a team. In turn, stronger fan support and pride can influence the performance and pride of the team itself for representing a greater team.

Teri McKeever has applied these findings to her team, and with incredible success. As the women's swimming and diving coach at the University of California Berkeley, McKeever has incorporated gratitude exercises into her team practices—and also won three NCAA National Championships in her twenty-year career there.

For McKeever, gratitude exercises help prepare her athletes for productive practice, as well as help foster cohesion within a team. While McKeever is talking about gratitude in the context of a swim team, the lessons she shares can be useful for any sort of leader, whether it is a coach, teacher, manager, or parent.

9.Stronger Neurologically-Based Morality

Neuroscience is beginning to explore what gratitude does to the mysterious human brain.

One study measured the brain's response to feelings of gratitude with functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) (Fox et al., 2015). These researchers elicited feelings of gratitude in their participants and found that gratitude increased activity in areas of the brain that deal with morality, reward, and judgment.

These neural findings are interesting and beget further studies. Is gratitude associated with morality? If so, this supports why philosophical and religious thinkers have used gratitude in the formation and maintenance of their societies (1991).



The Effects of Gratitude

In a study by McCraty and colleagues (1998), 45 adults were taught to “cultivate appreciation and other positive emotions.”

The results of this study showed that there was a mean 23% reduction in the stress hormone cortisol after the intervention period. During the use of the techniques, 80% of the participants exhibited an increased coherence in heart rate variability patterns, indicating reduced stress.

In other words, these findings suggest that people with an “attitude of gratitude” experience lower levels of stress.

Another study by Seligman, Steen, and Peterson (2005) gave participants one week to write and deliver a letter of thanks, in person, to someone who had been especially kind to them—but who had never been properly thanked. The gratitude visit involves three basic steps:

1. First, think of someone who has done something important and wonderful for you, yet who you feel you have not properly thanked.
2. Next, reflect on the benefits you received from this person, and write a letter expressing your gratitude for all they have done for you.
3. Finally, arrange to deliver the letter personally, and spend some time with this person talking about what you wrote.



The results showed that participants who engaged in the letter-writing exercise reported more happiness for one month after the intervention compared to a control group.

Expressing gratitude not only helps people appreciate what they've received in life, but it also helps people feel like they have given something back to those who helped them.

Hand-delivering a letter of thanks might help absolve residual guilt you might feel for not having thanked this person. This act can foster a sincere, heartfelt interaction that strengthens your relationship, and gives meaning to both parties' lives.

Social Effects of Gratitude

Gratitude can be observed at an individual level, with its subsequent effects, or at a greater social level. The recipient of gratitude may not reciprocate directly back, but in turn, may lend a favor to a third party, effectively expanding a network of good (Chang, Lin, & Chen, 2011). Sometimes, the recipient may give back to the initiator as well.

Effectively, gratitude can create social networks and help individuals work towards goals and challenges, and overall, simply have stronger coping skills for life's hardships.



Gratitude in Relationships

In a romantic relationship, both partners take actions to please the other one. This can elicit several emotions such as gratitude and indebtedness. Algoe et al. (2010) looked into these two emotions as an emotional response to an intentionally provided benefit.

Gratitude and indebtedness are associated with the intention to repay for the received benefit. It leads to internal motivation and external motivation to reciprocate.

Thoughtful Actions

Algoe et al. (2010) asked 67 couples to keep a diary for 2 weeks. The participants had to record their own and their partner's thoughtful actions, emotions, and "relationship well-being."



When coupling the data of the two partners, researchers examined if a thoughtful action of the participant was recognized by the partner and if they acknowledged the action accordingly.

Algoe et al. (2010) found that indebtedness did not always prompt reciprocity in actions, but gratitude did.

When these feelings of gratitude are noticed by the partner, the relationship well-being of the partner also increases.

Gratitude Intervention

Couples who want to improve their relationship might benefit from writing about their relationship and paying attention to moments of gratitude. Therapists can use this as “homework” for their clients.

Let both partners keep a diary for a few weeks, and discuss the answers in the next therapy consult. Did they recognize and acknowledge what their partner did for them? Why or why not? How did it make them feel?

By practicing the partners can become more aware of the thoughtful actions of their partner and respond to them with gratitude. This exercise can induce an upward spiral and improve the relationship well-being and can be a powerful intervention and communication tool for romantic partners.

Apply It to Your Life

This very evening, before you go to sleep, think of the positive things that happened during the day. Take a moment to do this every night. Consider a gratitude journal.



For those struggling with depression or anxiety, this can also frame the beginning of a day: before getting out of bed, consider three things—however small—that they are grateful for. Even on a really hard day, make yourself do this, even if your internal voice is one of sarcasm: just three things.

If you have children, take a moment with them before bed-time to ask them to think about something they're grateful for themselves. Set a good example by sharing what you're grateful for, as this shows children the importance of the practice.

If you feel that you have neglected to thank someone in your life, maybe write them a letter explaining your gratitude. Deliver it in person, if possible. Who knows what impact this will have on both of your days, and lives.

All of these actions, however little, help shape a culture of gratitude.

