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Those who are grateful have been found to have a better sense of the meaning of life. (Lifestyle Travel Photo/Shutterstock)

MIND & BODY

The Profound Health Benefits of Being Grateful

Learn the basics of how the simple practice of gratitude can have profound positive effects on your health and well-being; it might even help you recover faster from trauma and injury.

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Gratitude is a simple practice that can have profound effects on your health and well-being. Positive effects linked to gratitude include social, psychological, and physical

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“The limits to gratitude’s health benefits are really in how much you pay attention to feeling and practicing gratitude,” said neuroscientist Glenn Fox, a gratitude expert at the University of Southern California. “It’s very similar to working out, in that the more you practice, the better you get. The more you practice, the easier it is to feel grateful when you need it.”

How Gratitude Changes Your Brain

Gratitude has distinct neurobiological effects, including in brain regions associated with interpersonal bonding and stress relief. When Fox and colleagues told stories of survivors of the Holocaust to elicit gratitude in 23 female subjects, they found that “ratings of gratitude correlated with brain activity in the anterior cingulate cortex and medial prefrontal cortex,” which are associated with moral cognition, value judgment, and theory of mind. Theory of mind is a psychological term that refers to our capacity to understand other people by attributing mental states to them.

Fox grew deeply interested in gratitude after his mother’s death from ovarian cancer. During her illness, he would send her studies on the benefits of gratitude in cancer patients, and she kept a gratitude journal in her final years.

In one example, 92 adults with advanced cancer engaged in mindful gratitude journaling or routine journaling. After seven days, those who kept a gratitude journal had significant improvements in measures of anxiety, depression, and spiritual well-being, so much so that the researchers concluded that “mindful gratitude journaling could positively affect the state of suffering, psychological distress, and quality of life of patients with advanced cancer.”

“Grateful people tend to recover faster from trauma and injury,” Fox told The Pulse. “They tend to have better and closer personal relationships and may even just have improved health overall.”

As it turns out, putting your gratitude in words can be an effective way to improve your mental health. Among 293 adults who sought psychotherapy services, those who engaged in gratitude writing reported significantly better mental health after four and 12 weeks than those who didn’t write or who wrote about their thoughts and feelings.

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Gratitude can be difficult to define, as it has elements of an emotion, a virtue, and a behavior all rolled into one. Gratitude involves a two-step process, as explained in “The Science of Gratitude,” a white paper by the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California–Berkeley. Those two steps include “1) ‘recognizing that one has obtained a positive outcome’ and 2) ‘recognizing that there is an external source for this positive outcome.’”

In this regard, the benefits of gratitude may be gleaned from the actions of other people or experienced in an internalized manner, such as when feeling gratitude about good fate or nature. In this way, gratitude is both a state and a trait.

As a state, gratitude is based on a person’s ability to be empathic and experience grateful emotions that promote prosocial behavior. As a trait, it describes the practice of being grateful, noticing the little things in life, and appreciating the positive in the world and in other people. Gratitude can be felt from both being helped by others and habitually focusing on the good in your life.

A study published in *Clinical Psychology Review* found that gratitude has a positive effect on psychopathology, especially depression, adaptive personality characteristics, positive social relationships, and physical health, including stress and sleep. What’s more, they noted that “the benefits of gratitude to well-being may be causal.”

Fox also explained that “benefits associated with gratitude include better sleep, more exercise, reduced symptoms of physical pain, lower levels of inflammation, lower blood pressure, and a host of other things we associate with better health,” including improved resilience.

It’s likely that gratitude leads to benefits via multiple mechanisms, not only by improving life satisfaction, but also by contributing to an increase in healthy activities and a willingness to seek help for health problems. Those who are grateful have even been found to have a better sense of the meaning of life by being able to perceive good family function and peer relationships.

Gratitude Could Help You Sleep Better, Be Less Materialistic

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Gratitude is known to facilitate improvements in healthy eating, and it benefits depression by enhancing self-esteem and well-being. A 2021 study comparing gratitude and optimism similarly found that both traits were associated with lower heart rate and blood pressure, better sleep quality, more exercise, less stress, more positive expectations and reflections, and greater feelings of appreciation toward others.

Feeling grateful can help you sleep better and longer, perhaps by improving your thoughts prior to sleep.

“The relationship between gratitude and each of the sleep variables was mediated by more positive pre-sleep cognitions and less negative pre-sleep cognitions,” a study in the *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* reads.

Those who scored higher on measures of gratitude had better sleep quality and sleep duration, as well as less sleep latency (the amount of time it takes you to fall asleep) and daytime dysfunction.

Further, people who are more grateful tend to be happier, less materialistic, and less likely to suffer from burnout. Among adolescents, the simple practice of keeping a gratitude journal significantly reduced materialism and the negative effect of materialism on generosity.

Those who wrote down what they were grateful for donated 60 percent more of their earnings to charity, for instance. There’s good reason to teach children the importance of gratitude, as doing so can improve school performance and orient individuals toward a positive life approach.

Positive Gratitude Interventions

If you’re not a particularly grateful person, you might have to work on your gratitude skills. Fortunately, gratitude is something that you can practice, according to Fox.

“I think that gratitude can be much more like a muscle, like a trained response or a skill that we can develop over time as we’ve learned to recognize abundance and gifts

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Rather than a magic bullet, it's the regular practice of being grateful that makes a difference, according to Fox.

"You know, it's like water cutting rock through a canyon," he said. "It's not done all at once, and it's just steady practice is where you start to get things."

Two gratitude practices that you can try in your daily life include keeping a gratitude journal and expressing gratitude.

With a gratitude journal, you write down lists of what you're grateful for on a regular basis. Expressing gratitude is exactly what it sounds like, expressing grateful feelings to others, such as by saying thank you or writing gratitude letters, which you then read to the recipients.

Showing gratitude to your partner is also a good way to boost your relationship. In a study of romantic partners, gratitude from interactions was linked to increased connection and satisfaction in the relationship, with researchers suggesting that "gratitude had uniquely predictive power in relationship promotion, perhaps acting as a booster shot for the relationship."

Robert Emmons, a professor of psychology at the University of California–Davis and an expert on gratitude, has several tips for living a more grateful life. In an article he wrote for Greater Good Magazine, he advises that you remember hard times in your life, which remind you how much you have to be grateful for now; appreciate what it means to be human by tuning into and appreciating your sense of touch, sight, smell, taste, and hearing; use visual reminders, including people, to trigger gratitude, as this helps to combat forgetfulness and a lack of mindful awareness, two primary obstacles to gratefulness; and make an oath of gratitude, as simply vowing to be grateful can increase the likelihood that you'll stick to the behavior. Post your pledge to "count your blessings" somewhere where you'll see it often.

If you want to get started today, keep a notebook by your bedside and make a point to jot down one or two things that you're grateful for each night before bed and express gratitude to others often, such as writing quick thank you notes to friends.

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