

Commentary...

Gratitude is critical to well-being

By Mitchell Luftig | Columnist

During challenging times it is helpful to remind ourselves that we still have reasons to be grateful. But many of us — even in the best of circumstances — find it difficult to sustain a feeling of gratitude.

There are important reasons to raise your gratitude I.Q.

- Grateful people experience:
- Increased happiness and positive mood.
 - More satisfaction with life.
 - Less materialism.
 - Less burnout.
 - Better physical health.
 - Better sleep.
 - Less fatigue.
 - Lower levels of cellular inflammation.
 - Greater resiliency.
 - More patience, humility, and wisdom.

When practiced by groups, gratitude:

- Increases pro-social behaviors.
- Strengthens relationships.
- May help employee effectiveness.
- May increase job satisfaction (www.positivepsychology.org).

One way to become more grateful is to study the characteristics of individuals born with an abundance of gratitude and to model our behavior after them.

- Grateful individuals:
- Recognize the thoughtful actions of others.
 - Express their appreciation to those who treat them with generosity, kindness, and helpfulness.

- Reciprocate good deeds and pay them forward to strangers.

- Use their gratitude to discover the conditions for happiness in their lives.

Gratitude itself is a social glue that:

- Helps grateful people find individuals whose thoughtfulness makes them a good candidate for a relationship.
- Reminds grateful people of the goodness of their existing relationships.
- Binds grateful people — through their expressions of appreciation and acts of thoughtfulness — to their friends and partners.

If you want to become more grateful:

- Value your relationships, especially the people who act in a thoughtful manner, more than your prosperity or the material goods that you possess.
- Recognize the conditions for happiness that already exist in your life rather than fantasizing how happy you would be if you could only live someone’s more glamorous life.
- Replace the cynical view that people will only look out for their own selfish interests with the optimistic view that people often treat each other in a thoughtful manner.
- Value acts of generosity, kindness, and helpfulness as a gift, given to you freely, rather than something “due you” because you are so much more important than everyone around you.

We can also learn to become more grateful by practicing evidence-based gratitude exercises. Gratitude exercises have been shown to have

positive benefits for our well-being, happiness, life satisfaction, grateful mood, grateful disposition, and positive affect. Gratitude exercises may also result in decreases in depressive symptoms.

Here are some of the best-researched gratitude exercises.

Keeping a gratitude journal

According to Robert Emmons, you will receive the most benefit from writing about your experience of gratitude when you:

- Make a conscious decision (set your intention) to become happier and more grateful and you view the act of journaling as a valuable tool to get you there.
- Elaborate on a particular thing for which you’re grateful (rather than constructing a superficial list).
- Focus on the people to whom you are grateful rather than the things people have given you or you’ve acquired.
- Reflect on what your life would have been like without certain blessings that you’ve received.
- Record events that were unexpected or surprising as these often elicit higher levels of gratitude.
- Keep the experience “fresh” by writing in your journal just once or twice a week.
- Take the time to really relish and savor the gifts of thoughtfulness that you receive.

Gratitude visits can make us feel significantly happier a month later, according to Martin Seligman.

Here are the steps to take for a successful gratitude visit:

1. Recall the face of someone who

years ago did or said something that changed your life for the better— someone whom you never really thanked but with whom you could meet in the next week or so.

2. Write a letter of about 300 words in which you very specifically describe just what this person did for you and how it affected your life.

3. Arrange to meet (or Zoom) with this person, remaining vague about the purpose of the visit.

4. Read the letter to them, noting both their reaction and your own.

5. After you finish reading the letter discuss its contents and the feelings they evoked in each of you.

If you’re not quite ready for a gratitude visit, follow the first two steps of the gratitude visit and write a gratitude letter.

Simply the act of writing the gratitude letter, whether or not you mail it, is likely to make you feel happier.

Seligman also recommends the **What-Went-Well Exercise** (Three blessings).

Every day for a week, before you go to bed, write down three things that went well that day and why you think they went well.

If something special happened that day, be sure to include it, but the events you write about don’t have to be earthshaking. Participants who persisted, despite their initial awkwardness about explaining why they thought an event went well, usually found themselves still completing the What-Went-Well Exercise six months later.

What are you grateful for? Time to find out!



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