

The Healing Power of Gratitude

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“Gratitude is not a feeling you have when everything is going your way. It is mindset. It is an attitude. It is a thanksgiving for all of your blessings. You will find your blessing behind all your woes. It is waiting to be revealed as you. Gratitude lifts your spirits. It puts you in a positive frame of mind. It makes you feel good.” *Susan Peabody*

“You were given life; it is your duty (and also your entitlement as a human being) to find something beautiful within life, no matter how slight.” *Elizabeth Gilbert*

Gratitude is perhaps the most important key to finding success and happiness in the modern day. Knowing what we appreciate in life means knowing who we are, what matters to us and what makes each day worthwhile. Paying attention to what we feel grateful for puts us in a positive frame of mind. It connects us to the world around us and to ourselves. Research demonstrates that focusing on what we are grateful for is a universally rewarding way to feel happier and more fulfilled.

As an important mental health principle, the benefits of gratitude extend far beyond what we may imagine. Scientific studies have found that gratitude is associated with:

Greater happiness
More optimism and positive emotions

New and lasting relationships
Better health
More progress toward personal goals
Fewer aches and pains
More alertness and determination
Increased generosity and empathy
Better sleep
Improved self-esteem

With no downside to practicing more gratitude, it seems like a goal we would all embrace. Yet, as we aim to cultivate more gratitude, there are two questions to consider: what barriers do we face in feeling grateful in our daily lives, and how can we connect more fully to our feelings of appreciation? We'll start with the first question.

Why do people have trouble feeling grateful?

1. It's difficult to acknowledge what we have. One of the explanations people give for why they've stopped showing appreciation (or even feeling it) is that they've simply stopped paying attention, as their lives have become more sped up or routine. Part of the reason we start to take things (including relationships) for granted in this way is because it's actually hard to recognize and have feelings for what we have. Slowing down and living in a state in which we feel more present and aware of what makes us happy and gives our lives meaning naturally allows us to feel more joy, but it's also a gateway to sadness.
2. As much as we all would say we want love, acknowledgment, happiness, kindness, and generosity, it can be very hard to accept each of these for a variety of unexpected reasons. To love means we are vulnerable and wanting, which puts us in a position where we have something to lose. To be in touch with what matters to us

brings us closer to our feelings, with happiness and sadness becoming more prominent. Generosity, both offering it and having it offered to us, often arouses sadness. This emotion can make us uncomfortable or anxious, but it can also have a simultaneously calming and invigorating effect, making us feel more vital and exuberant. Feeling sadness centers us in ourselves.

3. Gratitude reminds us of what we lacked in the past. I can't tell you how many people have come into my office happier than ever from having fallen in love, and yet they are completely terrified, because the way they are being treated by their partner is so different from how they were ever treated before. You may think getting something we want after not having it for so long would make us even more grateful, and this is partly true. However, we may also face challenges in accepting love or generosity and expressing gratitude when we experience something that is so different from what we have been used to, especially in our childhood. Subconsciously, this can awaken old sadness about what was lacking in our past.
4. When this happens, we start to feel uncomfortable or unworthy of the things we are receiving. Recognizing what we have can also stir up guilt or feelings of indebtedness. We may feel embarrassed or apologetic for getting what someone else wanted or even for feeling we have more than someone else, especially when it is a parent or sibling or a close friend. We may also be overwhelmed by a feeling that we now owe someone else for our happiness. Without realizing it, we may avoid gratitude to avoid these other undesirable feelings.
5. When we feel shaken up, we may pull away from whatever is making us happy. We may start to view our life through a distorted

lens, with thoughts like, “He just wants something from you” or “This isn’t going to last, so don’t get too comfortable.” These unsettling thoughts and emotions can make expressions of gratitude or acknowledgments of the contrast between our past and our present feel much more difficult, even threatening.

How can we feel more grateful?

6. Challenge your critical inner voice. We can start to feel more gratitude by quieting the negative thoughts that turn us against ourselves and the people we love. The critical inner voice is a destructive thought process that hurts us in our daily lives by shaming us and warning us against others. This inner critic is like a dark cloud over our heads, sprinkling thoughts like, “Today is just going to be one of those days. It’s all too stressful. Just keep your head down.” Sometimes, the critical inner voice floods us with an all-out downpour, “Nothing will go right! Everyone is just looking to you to fix everything. You can’t handle this!” This voice can even sound soothing with thoughts like, “Just take care of yourself. No one else will.” Or, “Don’t bother making an effort. You have nothing to offer anyone.”
7. It’s easy to see how this inner critic can interfere with our feelings of gratitude. It takes us out of the present and keeps us entirely in our heads, distorting how we see the world. When in this state, we are often unavailable or mis-attuned to other people. While listening to this voice, we miss out on seeing the world around us through a more compassionate realistic lens. We fail to appreciate what is good in our lives and in ourselves and others. We lose sight of the fact that we have the right to value and pursue what gives our lives meaning. We can all become more aware of this destructive voice and not let it control our actions. I talk about this subject in more detail in my blog, “Silence Your Inner Critic.”

8. Act grateful and be more accepting. This sounds obvious and simplistic, but it's a plain truth that, just as acting more loving connects us to our feelings of being in love, expressing more gratitude makes us feel more grateful. We can engage in acts that will help us connect to our feelings of gratitude, from small gestures like looking the barista in the eye every morning as she serves us coffee or thanking a co-worker for a helpful task he performs regularly. It can mean taking time to call a friend to express our gratitude or doing something thoughtful and unexpected for our partner to make his or her day easier and to show how much we appreciate him or her. In each of these acts, we should strive to be present and absorb all that occurs. We should try not to divert our eyes or slough off the warm responses we may receive.
9. Many are surprised at how much harder this is than it sounds, but acceptance can be our biggest challenge. From early on, so many of us are taught to be self-sufficient and not to expect or take too much from others. In truth, it's important not to turn down offers, refuse gifts or avert compliments. When we ward off the acknowledgment or generosity of others, we actually hurt them and deny them the good feeling they would get from giving to us. We also fail to reciprocate with gratitude. It's important not to listen to our critical inner voice when it gets paranoid and suspicious about the generosity of others: "What does she want from you?" Be sure to make eye contact and say thank you for whatever form of generosity or recognition comes your way.
10. Practice mindfulness. Psychologist Jack Kornfield recently said in an interview, "The cultivation of mindfulness ... really allows us to become present for our own body, for the person in front of us, for the life we've been given. Out of that grows, quite naturally, the spirit of gratitude."

11. Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness rather nicely as “paying attention on purpose in the present moment, non-judgmentally...as if your life depended on it.” He recommends it as “a way of connecting with your life... that doesn’t involve a lot of energy” but rather “a kind of cultivating attention in a particular way.” When we practice mindfulness, we allow our thoughts and feelings to move through us without taking over and getting us lost. Mindfulness enables us to stay more connected to the people around us and awaken to what we've been missing, while plugging along in our daily existence. Practicing mindfulness is an ongoing, organic and effective way to tap into our feelings of gratitude.

12. Awaken your sense of wonder. When we follow the suggestions offered in this blog, we can become more in touch with ourselves. Our senses will be awakened, and we will have more responses to what we see, hear and feel. We will be better equipped to experience what psychologist Kirk Schneider describes as an essential component to a fulfilling life, awe.

