

WHY BEING GRATEFUL IS IMPORTANT

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WHY BEING GRATEFUL IS IMPORTANT

Could something as simple as a two-word sentence transform your life? Could it improve your relationships, lift your career, relieve stress and anxiety, and boost your overall wellbeing? Science suggests that, yes, this is possible! So what is this two-word sentence? *Thank you.*

Thank you is a recognition that the things you have, whether material or immaterial, had an origin outside of yourself. *Thank you* is a recognition that you have received something of value from somewhere or someone. *Thank you* is an expression of gratitude.

Science now shows the vital importance of positive thinking in general. And one of the most

important psychological tools for doing this is gratitude.

Gratitude has potential to increase happiness and contentment, reduce depression, strengthen resilience and measurably improve overall well-being. Research also shows that grateful people often have a more positive outlook on life, better physical health, and enhanced social relationships.

“Unprecedented” has become a common word today. Unprecedented levels of stress and anxiety are contributors to the high rates of long-term depression and suicide amongst teens and young adults in Australia and the world today. Unprecedented natural disasters have left a wake of devastation behind them. Unprecedented pestilences have decimated populations, forced social isolation, closed businesses; and threaten the world with economic recession.

Never has gratitude been more relevant than today. In this booklet, we will explore benefits

of, barriers to, and hidden dangers of, gratitude. Then we will look at things you can do to increase your personal gratitude.

WHAT IS GRATITUDE?

Since “thank you” is one of the most familiar expressions in any language, we probably all have a vague idea of what gratitude is. But actually, this common term encompasses a range of concepts. In general, gratitude is an acknowledgement that one has received something valuable that is undeserved (Emmons & McCullough, 2003, pp. 377-378). Emmons and McCullough further outline the two steps that this involves:

1. recognise the positive; and
2. recognise it has come from an external source. Psychologists also identify that this happens on three main personal levels: the character or “affective trait” level (a long-term, general or in other words dispositional tendency

toward gratitude, thus often called “trait” or “dispositional” gratitude); a mood level (variations in gratitude on a daily basis); and an emotional level (gratitude as it relates to individual events, such as receiving a single gift or favour) (Allen, 2018, p. 2). According to psychologists Wood, Froh, and Geraghty (2016, p. 891), dispositional (long-term) gratitude “is part of a wider life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive in the world.”

BENEFITS OF GRATITUDE

The topic of gratitude has become part of popular psychology in the past few decades. But just how valid are these claims? Is gratitude really important? It seems that yes, gratitude does make a difference to individuals and society.

First, let’s look at a few benefits of gratitude to individuals. Although only a new area of study, early research suggests that gratitude has benefits for physical health. For instance, gratitude has been linked with more robust

heart health and positive sleep patterns, both significant factors in health (McCraty, Atkinson, & Tiller, 1995; Wood, Joseph, Lloyd, & Atkins, 2009). Other studies suggest that more grateful people report better physical health and are more likely to engage in health-promoting behaviours (for more on this and the following points, see Allen, 2018, pp. 28-29). Gratitude may assist in prevention and treatment of chronic conditions, including chronic pain, arthritis, inflammatory bowel disease, chronic kidney disease, some cancers and diabetes. A grateful disposition has been connected with a number of aspects of general well-being, including life satisfaction, optimism and happiness. Gratitude may also protect against potential threats to health and happiness, such as materialism and burnout.

Moving to the social benefits of gratitude, research shows a connection between gratitude and prosocial behaviour, which can be defined as “voluntary acts performed to benefit another person or society” (see Allen, 2018, pp. 41-

47). Gratitude has also been linked with the formation and maintenance of satisfying social relationships, with thoughtful expressions of gratitude likely to be most effective in doing this. Gratitude has been shown to increase the resilience of individuals and relationships to challenging situations, including cancer-related stress, depression, and financial distress. In the workplace, gratitude has potential to enhance employee performance, increase employee job satisfaction, and boost helpfulness and respect amongst co-workers. Although much remains unknown, current research indicates that gratitude plays a vital role in the social connectedness that underlies the sustainability of individuals, families, communities and nations. How does gratitude achieve these amazing results? A number of theories have been suggested, which may work in complementary ways. One explanation is that, by encouraging creative thinking and through the formation and maintenance of social relationships, gratitude may “broaden and build” resources which then

continue to be available during times of stress (Allen, 2018, p. 34). This may help to explain the resilience-enhancing aspect to gratitude.

From the perspective of nerve function, science has shown that certain types of emotions are incompatible with one another at a momentary level (see Allen, 2018, pp. 34-35). By consciously choosing to be grateful, negative experiences can be seen in a new, more positive light, and are also dwelt upon less, because the mind is filled with positive thoughts that foster positive emotions. It is possible that many negative emotions associated with gratitude, such as indebtedness, guilt, and discomfort, when combined with the positive emotional outcomes of gratitude such as elevation, humility and connectedness, actually can be motivating, spurring a person on to self-improvement.

Through science, we are learning more and more about the benefits of gratitude. Specific knowledge about the human brain and the

effects of thinking on our words and actions has grown exponentially in just a few short decades. But did you know that many of these amazing discoveries of science were revealed thousands of years ago, in the Bible?

There are many Bible texts that promote the importance of a generally positive outlook on life, texts that encourage us to be hopeful and joyful even during difficult times. For instance, Psalm 43:5 says, *“Why are you cast down, O my soul? and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall yet praise Him, the help of my countenance and my God.”* The apostle Paul wrote, *“Rejoice evermore...In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you”* (1 Thessalonians 5:16,18). While on Earth, Jesus Christ Himself counselled His closest followers, *“Let not your heart be troubled... In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer”* (John 14:1; 16:33). Often the reason for such hope and happiness is linked more or less directly

to gratitude, as in Psalm 43:5, the first text listed above.

Some of the Bible verses that promote positivity and gratitude further suggest certain benefits to be gained by this. Proverbs is a wonderful resource in this respect. For instance, Proverbs 17:22 says “*A merry heart does good, like medicine, but a broken spirit dries the bones.*” The proverb, “*All the days of the afflicted are evil, but he who is of a merry heart has a continual feast*” (Proverbs 15:15), suggests the optimism, subjective well-being, positive affect, and happiness that science has linked with gratitude. Another relevant saying is, “*A man’s gift makes room for him, and brings him before great men*” (Proverbs 18:16). This verse suggests the role of gratitude in the formation and maintenance of social relationships.

The letters of the apostle Paul also place a strong emphasis on gratitude. Writing from prison, Paul urged the Philippian believers to “*Be*

anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6, emphasis added). He also stated the outcome of this: *“and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus”* (verse 7, emphasis added). This suggests that gratitude bolsters resilience to stress, as now recognised by research.

There are also many stories in the Bible that illustrate principles connected with gratitude. Probably the most famous of these is the story of the single leper who, from a group of ten healed, was the only to return and thank Jesus (Luke 17:11-19). On that occasion, Jesus asked the significant questions, *“Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine?”* Jesus then commended the man for his faith, which had led to action: the action of saying “thank you”. This shows that God longs for a personal relationship with each one of us, a relationship in which we

recognise that His gifts are a sign of His love, and in response we voluntarily offer thanks and service to Him.

BARRIERS TO BENEFICIAL GRATITUDE

With such benefits to be gained from gratitude, you may be wondering, could anything prevent me from experiencing these positive outcomes in my life? It turns out there are some psychological barriers to realising the benefits of gratitude. Misplaced gratitude can also be malproductive and even harmful. Let's examine these briefly.

Envy is an emotion that occurs when an individual is preoccupied with possessing things that belong to someone else (Parrot & Smith, 1993, p. 906). Materialism makes material possessions a central focus of life, the main source of happiness in life, or a marker of success (Tsang, Carpenter, Roberts, Frisch & Carlisle, 2014, p. 62). Since both envy and materialism focus on what an individual does not have, it

is logical that they are incompatible with, or at least limiting to, the amount of gratitude that individual may feel or express (Allen, 2018, p. 22).

The attitude of bitter negativity defined as *cynicism* has been suggested as the active process of blinding oneself to the positives in the world (Bell, 2016, p. 7). As with envy and materialism, it is difficult to maintain both cynicism and gratitude over an extended period of time.

Narcissism is a cluster of character traits that centre around an individual's exaggerated sense of self-importance (Campbell, 2019). Because narcissists actually believe they are better than others, they expect to be the focus of attention and have little if any empathy for others. In accordance with this, gifts from others are looked upon by a narcissist as something they deserve anyway, thus, they do not feel any sense of gratitude. If they perceive a gift or giver as

especially inferior, narcissists may even be insulted by gestures of this type.

What are the potential outcomes of replacing gratitude with negative traits and emotions such as materialism and narcissism? While narcissists may initially make a good impression on others, their lack of empathy and tendency to manipulate others for their own ends (albeit at times unthinkingly) tends to undermine any long-term relationships they may form, whether personal or professional (Campbell, 2019). Additionally, narcissists may be at risk of drug abuse and suicide. Materialists, despite the fact that they often accumulate more possessions than others, frequently experience depression, loneliness, and low self-esteem (Tsang et al., 2014). It is clear that a society based on these principles, rather than on gratitude and other positive emotions and affects, would be much less happy and healthy.

It is also important to note that, while much research has focused on the benefits of gratitude,

there is a dark side to gratitude (Wood et al., 2016). Gratitude can be, and often is, manipulated by high-power individuals or groups to maintain abusive relationships. In such instances, various techniques are used to induce those in low-power positions to feel a sense of gratitude, and thus obligation, to the high-power authority. Normal limits of gratitude responses may be exploited by those in high-power positions, to persuade those in low-power roles to surrender possessions or rights above and beyond what is reasonable.

Individuals in abusive situations need to have a clear understanding of the difference between beneficial and harmful gratitude, in order to make appropriate positive changes in their lives. Beneficial gratitude may still play a role in correcting these situations; for instance, through increasing gratitude towards those *outside* of the abusive relationship. These points need to be kept in mind when considering how to increase gratitude in specific cases.

HOW TO INCREASE GOOD GRATITUDE

So far, we have seen the importance of beneficial gratitude for individuals and society. *But is it possible to actually increase beneficial gratitude?* you may wonder. *How can I change my thoughts from negative to positive?*

The good news is, it is entirely possible to transform your life! A number of studies have been done that show the effectiveness of “gratitude interventions”: actions you can take to increase positive gratitude. It is also important to note that gratitude is as important during the “good times” as the bad. While gratitude during bad times helps to maintain the positive outlook that can keep conditions such as depression and suicide at bay, consciously practicing gratitude techniques during good times will help to prevent what has been called “hedonic adaptation”, that is, the tendency to take ongoing blessings for granted. Here are three practical ways to increase gratitude in your life.

1. Think positive

Gratitude, we learned earlier, first involves recognising the positive in life. So the first step to increasing gratitude is to think and talk positive. That may sound trite and “Pollyannaish”, but by saying that, I don’t mean we should take an unrealistic view of the world and deny that negative and even evil things exist. Grateful people do not deny or ignore the negative aspects of life; rather, they *rise above them*.

One of the best ways to actively change your patterns of thinking is by filling your thoughts with positive ideas through making careful entertainment choices. Have you ever considered how much of the programming on television, or how many news articles, books and magazines, seem to glorify crime, hatred and violence? It is true that we cannot completely avoid these things. But when we as a society are bombarding our minds constantly with such words and images, is it any wonder that so great a proportion of most people’s thoughts is negative?

Instead, I suggest spending that time reading positive literature. This is scientifically recognised as a way to transform your thoughts; it's called bibliotherapy (Gregory, Schwer-Canning, Lee, & Wise, 2004). Memorising wise, pithy sayings takes this technique a step further. Try a google search on “inspirational sayings” if you don't know where to start.

One of the best sources of inspirational sayings is the Bible, especially the books of Psalms and Proverbs. As we have already seen, the Bible contains a wealth of wisdom on gratitude. Building on this, excellent psalms specifically expressing gratitude include Psalm 103, 107, 117 and 147. Another passage that reveals the Bible's incredible insight into mental health is Philippians 4:8: *“Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate*

(that is, think) *on these things*.” Use this verse as a filter for your thoughts. If any thought comes to your mind that doesn’t fit these eight criteria, discard it immediately. That way, you will dismiss temptation, and that thought cannot harm you or others.

Other positive Bible verses and passages you may like to study and memorise include 1 Corinthians 13 (the love chapter); Romans 8:31-39; Isaiah 40:29-31; and (a personal favourite of mine) Revelation 21:1-5.

Once these positive thoughts are stored in your mind, be sure to express them in words. James 3:1-12 talks about the power of the tongue: it can be used for good or evil. The words you choose will have an effect on others, but also on your own mind. Be sure to echo and reinforce your positive thoughts with positive words, or much of your hard work will be wasted.

2. Count your Blessings

In 1897, Johnson Oatman penned the words:

*“When upon life’s billows you are tempest
tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost...
Count your blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath
done.”*

It is interesting to think of Oatman’s own story in relation to the words of this hymn. As Oatman grew up, he might have become discouraged at his inabilities as a preacher or singer. Instead, however, he focused on the gift he had been given: hymn writing. Oatman went on to write over *five thousand* hymns. Of “Count your Blessings”, Rodney “Gipsy” Smith, a well-known evangelist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, is reported to have said, “Men sing it, boys whistle it and women rock their babies to sleep to it” (Koinonia Bible Studies, n.d.). Focusing on blessings can turn apparent

misfortunes and failures into unimagined successes, which can in turn bring hope and encouragement to literally thousands.

In a study conducted in 2003, Emmons and McCullough decided to put the idea behind Oatman's song to the scientific test. Their study, called in part "Counting blessings versus burdens", experimentally investigated whether "counting blessings" can enhance psychological and physical functioning. They found that subjective well-being, health (for instance, sleep quality) and prosocial behaviour could indeed be increased by doing so. Although still in its infancy, research on gratitude interventions shows, in general, that it is possible to increase gratitude by various means, including gratitude journaling, gratitude letters and gratitude visits.

3. Study the Bible

We saw above the wisdom which the Bible offers on gratitude, and that it is a powerful tool in bibliotherapy for increasing positive, grateful

thoughts. By searching the Bible carefully, we can find many more techniques for how to increase gratitude. But I believe that the Bible is capable of making such a significant contribution to gratitude that it should be considered as a stand-alone point.

Beyond just wisdom and techniques, the Bible has something unique to offer about improving gratitude, something that no other book or philosophy can. The Bible introduces us to a personal God. It helps us to see negative events, the bad and evil things of this world, within a larger frame.

The Bible is a book unlike any other book. It is not written as a chronological story; if you read from Genesis to Revelation, you will not find there the events of Earth's history in the strict order in which they happened. But the Bible does contain an overall storyline, often called the Great Controversy (that is, a massive war or conflict). When we understand this big storyline,

we find out why there is evil in the world. And this big picture can bring hope and genuine gratitude into our lives, no matter how bad things in the world may become. I will outline this story very briefly in the next few pages.

The Bible reveals that God is love. He is the giver of every good and perfect gift. When He created everything from nothing, it was lovely and beautiful—perfect.

God created everything capable of receiving gifts from Him. Each being, according to its capacity, was then able to return thanks, praise and service to God. Each being was also to share the products of its activity with other created beings. This is God's law of love. It is based on gratitude, on voluntary obedience. And as long as everything and everyone obeyed that law, there was peace and joy throughout the universe. But, because God is a God of love, He chose to give intelligent beings the gift of free choice. That came at a risk: that one or more of the

beings He had created, and loved with infinite love, might choose to reject that love.

And sadly, that is what happened. Lucifer, the highest and most perfect of all the angels God had created, the one who understood better than any other created being the depth of God's love and the sacred, unchanging nature of His law, chose to violate that law. Rather than seeking to make God first in the affections of other created beings, Lucifer's intent was to himself be worshipped, as God. His was the first example of envy and materialism, the ultimate narcissism. By determining to continue along this dangerous path, even after it became clear to Lucifer that he was in the wrong, this deviant angel eventually stifled every feeling of gratitude in his heart to the point that his designs against not only his Creator, but his ongoing Sustainer, became self-destructively murderous.

Furthermore, it was not enough for Lucifer to keep these thoughts to himself. No; what was in

his heart found expression in malicious, cunning rumours (lies) about God that spread through the heavenly courts, until one-third of the angels were persuaded to share his rebellion, and his exile from heaven. Thus, Lucifer the light-bearer became Satan the enemy, the destroyer of those whom heaven had committed to his care and guardianship.

Having led so many angels to distrust God, to doubt His love and disobey His law, Satan then used the same techniques to persuade Adam and Eve, the parents of all human beings, to sin. It is disobedience to God's law, the law of love, that has caused all the pain and sorrow in our world. Despite Adam and Eve's rejection of God, He still loved them. He wanted to give them, and all humans, another chance to follow His law, and experience the love, life and joy this would bring.

To show humans God's great love, and His plan for how they were to live, Jesus, the second

Person of the Godhead, was to come to Earth. By coming to live as a human being on Earth, Jesus would show that God's law is full of love, and that it is possible to obey it. Then, Jesus would suffer the penalty of sin for every human being. He would experience eternal death, that is, complete separation from God the Father. But because Jesus has life in Him, He would rise again the third day.

Jesus Christ did all this when He took human nature 2000 years ago. His sacrifice has made it possible for every human being who chooses, to one day enjoy eternal, unending life, in a world made new, never again to be spoiled by sin. Now, He is working in heaven to bring His plan to save us to its glorious conclusion. Soon, very soon, He will appear in the clouds of heaven, to give eternal life to all who have chosen to trust in Him.

This great controversy, the amazing story of God's love, enables us to see what God is doing

for each one of us personally. It brings a whole new dimension to gratitude, which we now see is not only horizontal (person-to-person) but vertical (person-to-God).

Not only does the Bible offer this incredible narrative framework, that brings true meaning and purpose, the Bible has the power to transform lives. In John 17:17, Jesus prayed, *“Sanctify them by Your truth; Your word is truth.”* Sanctification is the process by which, as an individual accepts Christ as Lord of his or her life, he or she is transformed to become like Jesus, filled with love and compassion.

To realise the full extent of how the good news of the Bible can set you free, you can accept Jesus this moment as your Friend and Saviour. This is not just a once-in-a-lifetime experience, something that happens in a single moment, with no ongoing outcome. It is a day-by-day, moment-by-moment experience. Because everything comes ultimately from God, He is worthy of

our greatest expressions of gratitude. Unless we maintain a continual attitude of thankfulness to God, not only for His past blessings but for the life and breath we have every moment of every day, we will experience an inner emptiness, a hollow vacuum that nothing else can fill.

Friend, do you sense a longing in your heart, a desire for something that this world cannot give? If so, that is wonderful! It is God speaking directly to you! You may not know Him, but today He is calling you.

Go to God on your knees in prayer right now. Tell Him that you need a new heart, a transformed life. Tell Him all about your efforts to change, and how they have failed. Admit how ingratitude is destroying your peace, ruining your relationships and filling you with bitterness and resentment. Say all of this, then tell Him you believe He is the only One who can set you free. As you do this, you will find that a miracle, the truest and greatest miracle of all, will take

place in your life. At times, it will take all your willpower to cling to His hand, but if you do, you will find that He will work in you moment by moment, day by day, to transform your life. He does not promise to remove you from conflict, but He promises to walk with you through it. Gratitude is not about changing your circumstances, it is about changing you to meet those circumstances, however discouraging they may be. God can give you that gift of gratitude today, this moment. So, don't wait! Ask Him, now!

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