

Gratitude in the Face of Adversity: A Source of Resilience

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We live in a time of heightened anxiety, fueled in no small measure by ongoing acts of terrorism being perpetrated throughout the world. While renowned Harvard University psychologist Dr. Steven Pinker offers intriguing evidence in his bestselling book *The Better Angels of Our Nature* that violence in human societies has actually declined since Biblical days, many might question his position. Or, they might argue that even if Pinker's assessment is accurate, the occurrence of violence in today's world is still overwhelming. In some countries acts of violence are unrelenting, transpiring on a daily basis. Even in those countries in which such acts are sporadic, the unpredictability of when and where they will occur generates an ongoing sense of anxiety in many people.

In just the past six months there are many examples of the loss of lives as a result of terrorism—the downing of a Russian plane over Egypt with more than 200 aboard, the murder of nine worshipers at the historic Emanuel Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, the killings on several college campuses, including nine who perished at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon, the shootings at a Planned Parenthood facility in Colorado Springs that left three dead including a police officer, and a second round of mass murders in Paris followed just a few weeks later by the slaughter in San Bernardino, California. Not surprisingly, these and other terrorist actions intensify the belief and fear that no one is truly safe anywhere or anytime.

Law enforcement agencies rightfully advise citizens to be alert to their surroundings and to report any kind of suspicious behavior. However, many acts of violence are not predictable; a trail of evidence that is produced after the atrocities have been committed frequently reveals that warning signs were missed, but as we have heard on numerous occasions, “Hindsight is 20/20 vision.”

Is There Anything You Can Do?

Following the killings in San Bernardino, a newscaster reported that fears voiced by Americans about terrorism were the highest they have been since the attacks on 9/11. I recall that after 9/11 I was frequently asked what steps could be taken both to manage the emotional turmoil produced on that day and to nurture resilience in ourselves and our

children. I devoted several website articles to the topic in an attempt to answer that question, and I included links to material prepared by other mental health professionals or organizations. In recent months I have been asked questions similar to those raised after 9/11.

Yvonne Abraham, a columnist for *The Boston Globe*, authored a very emotionally revealing piece about the fears she has experienced as a result of the terrorist attacks. She asserts, “There’s really nothing you can do to fully protect yourself.” I agree. How does one *fully* protect oneself? How many and what kind of precautions can one take? We should certainly report suspicious behavior, but “suspicious” may mean different things to different people. I believe that in our current political climate, the constant pronouncements of presidential candidates that no one is safe from terrorism serve to stoke the fires of suspicion and fear, especially since the solutions offered to protect citizens are viewed by many as impractical, unrealistic, and undemocratic.

Anxiety and a Lack of “Personal Control”: What Steps Can We Initiate?

When we feel we have little, if any, control over what transpires in our lives we are increasingly vulnerable to slipping into a victim’s mentality, characterized by a sense of helplessness and anxiety. We may experience a terrifying loss of what I have labeled “personal control,” a basic foundation for resilience. I have attempted to counteract this experience of loss by expressing the belief that “we are the authors of our own lives” and that while there are events in our lives that we cannot influence, we have far more control than we may realize over our attitudes and response to these events.

How does subscribing to the belief that we are the authors of our own lives help us to cope with acts of terror that are basically beyond our control? One response I have heard is that we engage in a reality check and recognize that there is a very small probability of terrorism occurring in our own lives. However, such an explanation may offer little comfort for two basic reasons. First, it resorts to probability theory, which is based on the intellect; the intellect typically does not trump strong feelings such as anxiety. Second, given the immediacy of news reports as well as our connectedness with the world via technology, what transpires in Paris or Egypt, which may be thousands of miles away, seems much closer to where we live than ever before in our history.

Although some may disagree, I believe a more adaptive approach than resorting to probability theory is to ask, “Are there steps we can initiate that will help to lessen anxiety and despair and replace these emotions with a sense of meaning and purpose in our lives?” In posing this question I am not implying that we deny the existence of horrific situations but rather that we not permit these situations to determine the ways in which we conduct our lives. We often hear the observation that the more we succumb to fear and the more we allow fear to direct our lives and everyday activities, the more the terrorists have accomplished their goals. Learning productive ways of coping with fear should be a top priority.

Gratitude: An Antidote to Anxiety

In last month’s column I described one well-researched strategy to lessen the impact of stressful events, namely, to engage in activities that enrich the lives of others. In this month’s article, I want to highlight another variable that is associated with happiness and resilience that can serve to mitigate the many stresses that exist in today’s world—that variable is *gratitude*.

Several years ago I read psychologist Dr. Robert Emmons’ book *Thanks! How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier*. Emmons, a psychologist on the faculty of the University of California, Davis, conceives of gratitude as involving two stages. “First, gratitude is the *acknowledgment* of goodness in one’s life. . . . We affirm that all things taken together, life is good and has elements that make it worth living. . . . Second, gratitude is *recognizing* that the source(s) of this goodness lie at least partially outside the self.”

Emmons adds that gratitude includes our appreciation that we have been the recipient of someone’s act of kindness and that the latter has intentionally provided this kindness. “Gratitude implies humility—a recognition that we could not be who we are or where we are in life without the contributions of others. . . . Being grateful is an acknowledgment that there are good and enjoyable things in the world.”

A publication from Harvard Medical School titled “In Praise of Gratitude” reviewed research about gratitude, including that undertaken by Emmons and his colleague at the University of Miami, Dr. Michael McCullough. The publication reports, “In positive psychology research, gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with

greater happiness. Gratitude helps people feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve their health, deal with adversity, and build strong relationships.”

One study conducted by Emmons and McCullough involved three groups, each asked to write several sentences each week in a journal. One group was requested to write about things that had transpired during the week for which they were grateful, another group to write about things that irritated or displeased them, and the third group to write about events that had an impact on them (no direction was given to this third group in terms of these events being positive or negative). After 10 weeks, those in the gratitude group were “more optimistic and felt better about their lives” than those in the other two groups.

Similar results were reported in a study designed by psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania. However, unlike the task involved in the Emmons and McCullough study, Seligman asked participants to write and personally deliver a letter of gratitude to someone whom they had not thanked for his or her kindness. Compared with a control group, those who wrote and delivered the letter immediately “exhibited a huge increase in happiness scores.”

The Harvard publication also described studies that found, not surprisingly, that expressions of gratitude can enhance the relationships that couples have with each other and that the simple act of managers saying “thank you” to their staff led to greater motivation on the part of the employees.

Gratitude in a Time of Terror

Even more relevant for this article are Emmons’ observations about gratitude and resilience in the face of the 9/11 attacks. In his book *Thanks!* he observes that understandably some of the first studies of survivors of the destruction of the World Trade Center buildings centered on negative outcomes such as posttraumatic stress disorders, anxiety, depression, and sleep disorders. However, subsequent studies examined positive emotions that emerged in the wake of the tragedy, emotions such as gratitude that contributed to resilience. “People might have felt grateful to be alive or to know that their loved ones were safe.”

Emmons adds, “One might wonder if all of this positivity was merely a form of denial. After all, one way to cope with trauma is to seal off the negative thoughts and

images from conscious awareness. Yet there was no evidence for such a suppression effect in the data.” Resilient individuals did not deny negative emotions, but they also experienced positive emotions and thoughts.

Certain factors have been highlighted as sources of resilience, including social support, a sense of purpose, meaning, and personal control, an optimistic outlook, and humor. Emmons suggests that gratitude be added to this list. He offers many examples of the healing power of gratitude, including from those who lost so much in Hurricane Andrew, the 1992 hurricane that proved to be one of the deadliest natural disasters to ever hit Florida. A study of parents who lived through Andrew found that one of the main factors in reinforcing resilience “was an overwhelming sense of gratitude for what they had *not* lost during the hurricane.” One father observed, “I had this overwhelming joy to be alive. . . that’s what was important. . . that elation that we were alive; that really stuck with us.”

Strategies to Cultivate Gratitude

If as Emmons recommends gratitude be added to the list of essential components of resilience or what my colleague Sam Goldstein and I would call a “resilient mindset,” one can wonder, “Are there ways to cultivate gratitude so that it is available to us during both good and challenging times?” In a more recent article “How Gratitude Can Help You Through Hard Times” that was published in a newsletter of The Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley, Emmons clearly believes that an attitude of gratitude can be nurtured.

In this article Emmons makes a distinction between *feeling* grateful and *being* grateful. He contends that compared with feeling grateful, being grateful “is a choice, a prevailing attitude that endures and is relatively immune to the gains and losses that flow in and out of our lives. When disaster strikes, gratitude provides a perspective from which we can view life in its entirety and not be overwhelmed by temporary circumstances. Yes, this perspective is hard to achieve—but my research says it is worth the effort.”

Emmons describes strategies to strengthen gratefulness in his book *Thanks!* as well as in a follow-up book *Gratitude Works! A 21-Day Program for Creating Emotional Prosperity*. I have selected the following three strategies to highlight in this article

(interested readers should review Emmons' publications for a more complete list and overview of the strategies):

Keep a gratitude journal. A very effective technique for creating an attitude of gratitude is “to keep a daily journal in which you record the blessings you are grateful for. When we are grateful we affirm that a source of goodness exists in our lives.” While Emmons recommends daily entries in the journal, others believe that the same effect can be accomplished every few days. Emmons cautions that when first using a gratitude journal, we may experience discouragement, believing that our list is very limited. However, he states, “I have found that becoming aware of one’s blessings actually leads to having more to be grateful for.”

Remember the bad. This may seem contradictory to the first suggestion. However, Emmons advances an interesting perspective, namely, “trials and suffering can actually refine and deepen gratefulness if we allow them to show us not to take things for granted. Our national holiday of gratitude, Thanksgiving, was born and grew out of hard times.”

While times of crisis can generate gratefulness, Emmons believes that “gratitude also helps us cope with crisis. Consciously cultivating an attitude of gratitude builds up a sort of psychological immune system that can cushion us when we fall. There is scientific evidence that grateful people are more resilient to stress, whether minor everyday hassles or major personal hassles.”

Go through the motions. This recommendation takes into consideration that engaging in acts of gratitude may not be part of one’s current repertoire, that to demonstrate gratitude may initially seem artificial or forced. However, as Emmons asserts, “Do it now, and the feeling will come. There is a great deal of psychological evidence showing that attitude change often follows behavior change.”

Expressions of gratitude, while seemingly simple, can have lifelong effects. Emmons poses the question, “What is a grateful motion?” His answer resonates with recommendations I offer in many of my writings and presentations. “Saying thank you. Writing letters of gratitude. Expressing gratitude toward someone whom you’ve never properly taken the time to thank can have profoundly positive consequences for both the person expressing and the recipient.”

A Suggestion

I want to return to my opening comment, “We live in a time of anxiety.” We cannot and should not deny what Emmons calls the “bad.” However, we should not let the bad prompt us to adopt behaviors rooted in helplessness, fear, and suspicion. Instead, we should engage in actions that are powerful antidotes to these negative emotions—actions such as caring for others or expressing gratitude.

I would like to suggest that after you finish reading this article you jot down one or two things for which you are grateful and/or write a note of gratitude to someone. I know that such actions will not remove terrorism nor magically erase our anxiety, but I believe they will begin to remind us of the good that exists in the world; hopefully, they will also provide a sense of security and resilience. As Anne Frank, in one of her most poignant and well-known quotes observes, “Despite everything, I believe that people are really good at heart.”

And in ending this column I want to thank my wife Marilyn for offering feedback and editing every website article I have written prior to the article being sent out and posted. Her input has been invaluable.

And to my readers, I appreciate your interest in my work, and I want to convey my best wishes to you and your family for a happy and peaceful 2016.

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