

Gratitude

Part II

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Based on the emails I received in response to my November article, the topic of gratitude is of great interest to many of my readers. [In last month's article](#) I cited research that demonstrated the significant benefits experienced by both the givers and the recipients of gratitude. I also described two main expressions of gratitude: one that involves considering on a regular basis two or three things for which we are grateful, and the second occurring when we convey appreciation to those who have enriched our lives in a small or large manner.

In my November article I indicated that in my next column I would expand upon the mindset and actions associated with the benefits of gratitude. To begin, I wish to describe fascinating research that examines brain activity that occurs when we engage in acts of gratitude. Dr. Glenn Fox, a neuroscientist on the faculty at the University of Southern California, described this research in an article titled "[What Can the Brain Reveal About Gratitude?](#)"

Fox spells out what drew him to undertake this research, namely, that while recent studies demonstrate the benefits of gratitude for our physical and emotional well-being, little is known about what actually takes place in our brain and body when we experience gratitude. Fox explains that a greater understanding of the physiology of gratitude might help identify actions that we can initiate for "harnessing its health benefits." Fox also raises the challenges of studying people at the moment they experience gratitude, especially since some people might not feel gratitude when it is expected, while others might feel grateful under unexpected circumstances.

Brain Activity and Gratitude

To address this research issue, Fox considered that stories might be an effective way of inducing a sense of gratitude. He and his colleagues gathered videotaped accounts from the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History, a resource that contains the world's largest collection of first-hand accounts offered by Holocaust survivors. Fox focused on stories in which the survivor reported receiving help of some

kind from another individual. These stories were cast into short scenarios and then viewed by the participants in the study. The latter were asked to imagine themselves in the scenario of the Holocaust survivor and attempt to experience as much as possible how they would feel if in the same situation. As the participants followed these instructions, Fox and his colleagues measured their brain activity via functional magnetic resonance imaging or fMRI.

Both the anecdotal material gathered as well as the brain activity results were noteworthy. The participants reported strong emotions of gratitude, a deep involvement in the task, and an increased sense of empathy for and understanding of Holocaust survivors. As these feelings emerged, those parts of the brain linked to increased empathy and the regulation of emotions and stress relief showed increased activity. As Fox observes, these regions of the brain that are associated with gratitude “are part of the neural networks that light up when we socialize and experience pleasure. . . . Because gratitude relies on the brain networks associated with social bonding and stress relief, this may explain in part how grateful feelings lead to health benefits over time. Feeling grateful and recognizing help from others creates a more relaxed body state and allows the subsequent benefits of lowered stress to wash over us.”

Fox also cites studies conducted by other researchers that yielded findings similar to his own. For example, psychologists [Joshua Brown and Joel Wong at the University of Indiana studied almost 300 adults](#) who were seeking mental health services for depression and anxiety. The participants were randomly divided into three groups, all three of which received counseling services. In addition to counseling, one group was instructed to write a letter of gratitude to another person each week for three weeks; the second group was requested to write their thoughts and feelings about negative experiences, while no writing activity was asked of the third group.

Of the three groups, only the group that wrote letters of gratitude reported improved mental health not only at four weeks but also at twelve weeks after the writing exercise was completed. The researchers concluded that gratitude writing is one possible strategy to help those experiencing anxiety and depression (such writing has also been found to improve the lives of so-called “non-clinical populations”). Brown and Wong

state, “It seems that practicing gratitude on top of receiving psychological counseling carries greater benefits than counseling alone, even when that gratitude practice is brief.”

One component of Brown and Wong’s investigation, which was also part of Fox’s research, included fMRI studies of the brain. When those who wrote letters of gratitude were compared with those who did not, the fMRIs of the former group displayed greater activation in the medial prefrontal cortex while experiencing gratitude. This is the region of the brain that showed greater activation in Fox’s study as well.

Brown and Wong ended their article with the following recommendation: “Regardless of whether you’re facing serious psychological challenges, if you have never written a gratitude letter before, we encourage you to try it. Much of our time is spent pursuing things we currently don’t have. Gratitude reverses our priorities to help us appreciate the people and things we do.”

I would emphasize that in addition to the benefits felt by the person expressing gratitude, the recipient of this gratitude also experiences many positive emotions and, as I reported in last month’s article, is more likely to display gratitude towards others.

Habits of Grateful People

[Jeremy Adam Smith, editor of the Greater Good Science Center’s \(GGSC\) on-line magazine](#), shared his thoughts about what he referred to as the “habits of highly grateful people.” His use of the word “habit” implies that they can be learned and reinforced. Of the six habits he selected I wish to highlight two, the first of which relates directly to the research findings of Fox, Brown, and Wong.

In describing this first habit, Smith captures the impact of even seemingly small acts of gratitude—what I have referred to as “micromoments”—on the lives of both the giver and recipient. He proposes that “people will glow in gratitude. Saying thanks to my son might make him happier and it can strengthen our emotional bond. Thanking the guy who makes my coffee can strengthen social bonds—in part by deepening our understanding of how we’re interconnected with other people.”

Smith quotes his colleague Emiliana Simon-Thomas at GGSC, who wrote, “Experiences that heighten meaningful connections with others—like noticing how another person has helped you, acknowledging the effort it took, and savoring how you benefited from it—engage biological systems of trust and affection, alongside circuits for

pleasure and reward.” This viewpoint certainly encourages the expression of micromoments of gratitude.

A second habit described by Smith emphasizes that gratitude should not be relegated to the background during the difficult times we encounter. He is well aware that for most of us it is easier to be grateful when positive things occur in our lives and much more difficult when we are faced with struggles and negative experiences. I have often emphasized when discussing the tenets of positive psychology that a focus on strengths and positivity should not be interpreted to imply that we minimize or deny the negative events and emotions that we face. Experiencing genuine gratitude while feeling overwhelmed by adversity can actually provide the motivation and fuel to deal more effectively with this adversity.

In support of this last point Smith cites the work of psychologist Robert Emmons, a renowned researcher in the field of gratitude. Emmons has studied the ways in which gratitude can help people accept and manage difficult times.

[Emmons captures this viewpoint when he eloquently states:](#)

So telling people simply to buck up, count their blessings, and remember how much they still have to be grateful for can certainly do much harm. Processing a life experience through a grateful lens does not mean denying negativity. It is not a form of superficial happiology. Instead, it means realizing the power you have to transform an obstacle into an opportunity. It means reframing a loss into a potential gain, recasting negativity into positive channels for gratitude.

Concluding Thoughts

To those who have faced major hardships and loss, especially since the beginning of what sometimes feels like an unending pandemic, Emmons’ recommendation of focusing on gratitude and “realizing the power you have to transform an obstacle into an opportunity” may seem a Herculean task with little possibility of success. However, to lose sight of our blessings and to fail to appreciate the support and love of others is likely to create greater pessimism and despair and minimize the possibility that things can improve.

Given the research cited in this article, I believe we should reflect upon what small steps of gratitude we can initiate that will enrich our own physical and emotional

well-being as well as the well-being of others. As two possibilities, jot down a couple of things for which you are grateful and/or communicate your gratitude to even one other person.

In keeping with the focus of this article, I wish to express my gratitude and love to my family and friends who continue to be a source of optimism and strength for me. I also wish to convey my appreciation to the many individuals who continue to read and comment on my monthly articles. Your support and encouragement mean a great deal to me.

I hope the remainder of the holiday season and the New Year are filled with a sense of peace and happiness.

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