



# Gratitude and Mental Wellness

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

Can gratitude improve the way we feel? Here's an experiment you can try. Take a moment right now to be grateful for what you have. Think of everything you have or think of something specific such as your family, your house, enough food for today, or simply being alive.

After taking this moment, how do you feel? If you're like most people, you're feeling a little more peaceful.

The dictionary defines gratitude as a feeling of thankfulness and appreciation. We're grateful when we're conscious of a benefit received. It implies a sense of wonder and appreciation for the world around us, and is usually directed to someone or something else.

Gratitude is the focus of our Thanksgiving holiday. It also plays a strong role during the Christmas season if we can stop the hustle and bustle long enough to be thankful for each gift we have received.

In addition, we often express gratitude simply by being courteous. From an early age, most of us are taught to say, "thank you" whenever someone does something nice for us.

## **Research on Gratitude**

Recent psychological research shows that gratitude plays an important role in our happiness, our healthy adjustment to life, and even in our physical well-being. Dr. Robert Emmons and Dr. Michael McCollough describe some of these studies in their recently published book, *The Psychology of Gratitude*.

First the authors note the difficulty in actually defining gratitude. It can be an emotion, an attitude, a moral value, a habit, a personality trait, or a coping response. Their research focused on gratitude as an emotion.

Curiously enough however, Emmons and McCollough note that, before we can feel gratitude as an emotion, we have to be able to think about it. They identified three main components that we think about when we feel gratitude: 1) recognition that we have obtained a positive benefit, 2) that the benefit has come from an outside source (usually another person), and 3) the benefit was not necessarily earned or deserved.

In scientific experiments, individuals were asked to keep track of their experiences of gratitude. While participating in these experiments, the individuals noticed some positive changes. They reported more optimism, fewer physical symptoms, better sleep, more progress on their own personal goals, higher levels of positive states such as alertness, enthusiasm, and determination, fewer negative states (such as bitterness, sadness, and fear), and were more likely to report having helped someone else.

Perhaps more interesting, Emmons and McCollough found that this experiment actually boosted gratitude in those who participated. In other words, when individuals are asked to keep track of their experiences of gratitude, they actually experience more gratitude as well as the positive changes associated with it.

These researchers also studied people who were considered to have a grateful disposition and found that they were more positive, were more empathic of others, tended to be more spiritual, were more likely to attend religious services, and were less focused on material possessions.

### **Counting Your Blessings**

So what does this mean? It means that there is some truth to the old adage about counting one's blessings. People who count their blessings are happier and healthier. By spending more time being grateful, we become a better friend and better community member. We also become more appreciated by our friends. By increasing our gratefulness toward others, we can help to strengthen our families and communities.

What is equally powerful, Emmons and McCollough showed, is that gratitude can be taught and learned, practiced and applied. Gratitude implies that we recognize the help we get from others. No matter how much we do for ourselves, we can remain aware and acknowledge whenever someone else has helped us.

One way to improve our sense of gratitude is to simply be aware of it. We can use this approach to teach our children about gratitude as well. Children will learn when parents pay attention to situations in which they have benefited from the help of others. It's pretty simple. When parents model gratitude, children learn.

Dr. Emmons emphasizes that gratitude is a choice that we make. How readily we express gratitude is based on our personal habits and our attitude toward life. By being more attentive to opportunities to express gratitude we increase the opportunity to feel it, and obtain the benefits of that experience.

Saying "thank you" not only improves the day for the person you thank, it improves your day too. Thank you for allowing me to share this column with you.

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