

## Gratefulness

Gratitude is getting a great deal of attention these days within the realm of positive psychology. Studies show that gratitude not only can be deliberately cultivated, but can increase levels of well-being and happiness among those who do cultivate it. In addition, grateful thinking—and especially expression of it to others—is associated with increased levels of energy, optimism, and empathy.

The word gratitude is derived from the Latin word *gratia*, which means grace, graciousness, or gratefulness (depending on the context). It is a thankful appreciation for what we receive, whether tangible or intangible. In positive psychology research, gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with helping people feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve their health, deal with adversity, and build strong relationships. Although most studies cannot prove cause and effect, they do support an association between gratitude and an individual's well-being. A deliberate practice of gratefulness helps us refocus on what we have instead of what we lack. And, although a deliberate practice of gratefulness might feel artificial at first, this mental state grows stronger with use and practice.

Brain research suggests that consistent feelings of gratitude may actually affect brain health by creating feelings of optimism and determination resulting in fewer reports of body pains, less depression and anxiety, and improved sleep. Alex Korb, PhD, a UCLA postdoctoral researcher, says being thankful can increase your brain's 'reward circuits' and relates this to something called the 'virtuous cycle' of the brain. He says "the brain only has so much power to focus its attention. It cannot easily focus on both positive and negative stimuli. On top of that the brain loves to fall for the confirmation bias – that is, it looks for things that prove what it already believes to be true. So once you start seeing things to be grateful for, your brain starts looking for more things to be grateful for. That's how the virtuous cycle gets created."

Our personal well-being is far more important than status and possessions. The greatest obstacles to gratitude are envy, greed, pride, and narcissism. Materialism is not happiness. That feeling of entitlement will never bring joy. Happiness is peace of mind and all too often in this fast-paced roller coaster life, that concept is lost. The characteristics that define those people who can handle adversity – faith, hope, love, gratitude – are the same characteristics that define people who will have a happy, healthy and productive life. We all have bad days because life's not perfect, but when life gives us a blow it can be very helpful to write down the current things that we have to be grateful for ... Seeing those things in writing itself, and even the act of writing, can be calming and cathartic.

Life is a gift. Freedom is a gift. Employment is a gift. Friends and loved ones are gifts. Your very breath at this moment is a gift. Viewing life with grateful eyes gives insight that life owes you nothing ... allowing gratitude to work its humbling magic.

Angeles Arrien, in her book *“Living in Gratitude: A Journey That Will Change Your Life”*, says that although gratefulness often arises spontaneously, it is also a choice we make. She identifies the four universal portals to the practice and virtue of gratitude: 1) blessings; 2) learnings; 3) mercies; and 4) protections. As we develop our ability to track how the four portals appear in our lives we will find the benefits of gratitude practice are multidimensional, in that they will appear in the four quadrants of life experience that are common to all humans, which are – 1) health and well-being; 2) work environments

and communities; 3) financial stability; and 4) relationships. In addition, our personal 'evolution-experience quadrants' of both character development and spiritual growth, are influenced by, and in turn influence, our four life-experience quadrants.

In the quadrant of health and well-being, grateful people elicit more support from others. They cope better, have better health, and are more socially adaptable. In work environments the four portals to experience gratitude (blessings, learnings, mercies, and protections) are highly active within the realms of work and community. Work itself is what we have come here to do, whether to earn a living or to volunteer our time. It is our contribution to the world – our purpose, our calling. The financial quadrant is about our experience of solvency and abundance. When we focus our attention on all of the ways we are supported by our financial life, we find many opportunities to be grateful for what we have. In the Relationship quadrant it is important to remember that the longest relationship we have is with ourselves. Therefore, an important component of our life's experience is to befriend ourselves just as we are, today, in this moment.

As we evolve and mature we develop and scrutinize our character, our values, our authentic voice, our authentic self ... and qualities such as integrity, honesty, and gratitude become more precious than accuracy and efficiency. At the same time, our spirit, or life force, at the core of our essential nature, brings meaning to our life and allows us to integrate our internal and external experiences. It is our spirit that makes us unique – as we look for the goodness in ourselves and in others.

The practice of gratitude is yet another key element in developing the **skill of Positive Presence – the skill of adjusting and creating a positive an energized mindset within our self through conscious thought processes** –providing us with the necessary mechanism to focus on that which will bring us the greatest positive returns in terms of achieving peak performance, for building and maintaining good relationships, and for experiencing good health.