



Harvard Mental Health Letter

VOLUME 28 • NUMBER 5 | NOVEMBER 2011

In praise of gratitude

Expressing thanks may be one of the simplest ways to feel better.

The Thanksgiving holiday began, as the name implies, when the colonists gave thanks for their survival and for a good harvest. So perhaps November is a good time to review the mental health benefits of gratitude—and to consider some advice about how to cultivate this state of mind.

The word gratitude is derived from the Latin word *gratia*, which means grace, graciousness, or gratefulness (depending on the context). In some ways gratitude encompasses all of these meanings. Gratitude is a thankful appreciation for what an individual receives, whether tangible or intangible. With gratitude, people acknowledge the goodness in their lives. In the process, people usually recognize that the source of that goodness lies at least partially outside themselves. As a result, gratitude also helps people connect to something larger than themselves as individuals—whether to other people, nature, or a higher power.

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.

People feel and express gratitude in multiple ways. They can apply it to the past (retrieving positive memories and being thankful for elements of childhood or past blessings), the present (not taking good fortune for granted as it comes), and the future (maintaining a hopeful and optimistic attitude). Regardless of the inherent or current level of someone's gratitude, it's a quality that individuals can successfully cultivate further.

Research on gratitude

Two psychologists, Dr. Robert A. Emmons of the University of California, Davis, and Dr.

Michael E. McCullough of the University of Miami, have done much of the research on gratitude. In one study, they asked all participants to write a few sentences each week, focusing on particular topics.

One group wrote about things they were grateful for that had occurred during the week. A second group wrote about daily irritations or things that had displeased them, and the third wrote about events that had affected them (with no emphasis on them being positive or negative). After 10 weeks, those who wrote about gratitude were more optimistic and felt better about their lives. Surprisingly, they also exercised more and had fewer visits to physicians than those who focused on sources of aggravation.

Another leading researcher in this field, Dr. Martin E. P. Seligman, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, tested the impact of various positive psychology interventions on 411 people, each compared with a control assignment of writing about early memories. When their week's assignment was to write and personally deliver a letter of gratitude to someone who had never been properly thanked for his or her kindness, participants immediately exhibited a huge increase in happiness scores. This impact was greater than that from any other intervention, with benefits lasting for a month.

Of course, studies such as this one cannot prove cause and effect. But most of the studies published on this topic support an association between gratitude and an individual's well-being.

Other studies have looked at how gratitude can improve relationships. For example, a study of couples found that individuals who took time to express gratitude for their partner not only felt more positive toward the other person but also felt more ▶▶

INSIDE

Depressed parent, depressed child? 3

Possible family interventions for treatment and prevention.

Common memory lapses . . . 4

A look at some of the most typical problems.

In brief 6

How nicotine may suppress appetite; Psychotherapy options for social anxiety disorder; Encouraging news about borderline personality disorder; Sleep-disordered breathing and cognitive decline.

Ask the doctor 8

Is it possible to become addicted to chocolate?

WHAT'S NEW

Special Health Reports

Food Allergy, Intolerance, and Sensitivity

Better Bladder and Bowel Control

To order, call 877-649-9457 (toll-free) or visit us online at www.health.harvard.edu.

HB Receive Harvard Health Publications' free e-mail newsletter

Go to www.health.harvard.edu to subscribe to *HEALTHbeat*. This free, weekly e-mail newsletter brings you health tips, advice, and information on a wide range of topics.

You can also join in discussion with experts from Harvard Health Publications and folks like you by reading the Harvard Health Blog (www.health.harvard.edu/blog).

CONTACT US

Write to us at mental_letter@hms.harvard.edu

For customer service, write us at harvardMH@strategicfulfillment.com



Editorial Board members are associated with Harvard Medical School and affiliated institutions. They review all published articles.

Editor in Chief Michael Craig Miller, MD
Editor Ann MacDonald
Founding Editor Lester Grinspoon, MD
Editorial Board Mary Anne Badaracco, MD
Jonathan F. Borus, MD
Christopher B. Daly
Sandra Dejong, MD
Frank W. Drislane, MD
Anne K. Fishel, PhD
Donald C. Goff, MD
Stuart Goldman, MD
Alan I. Green, MD
Shelly Greenfield, MD, MPH
Thomas G. Gutheil, MD
Michael Hirsch, MD
Matcheri S. Keshavan, MD
Kimberlyn Leary, PhD, ABPP
Robert W. McCarley, MD
Michael J. Mufson, MD
Andrew A. Nierenberg, MD
Scott L. Rauch, MD, PhD
Hester H. Schnipper, LICSW, BCD
Janna M. Smith, LICSW, BCD
Caroline L. Watts, EdD
Barbara Wolfe, PhD, RN

Contributor Katherine Perch
Art Director Heather Derocor
Production Editor Nicole Wall

Customer Service

Phone 877-649-9457 (toll-free)
E-mail harvardMH@strategicfulfillment.com
Online www.health.harvard.edu/customer_service
Letters Harvard Mental Health Letter
P.O. Box 9308, Big Sandy, TX 75755-9308

Subscriptions \$72 per year (U.S.)

Bulk Subscriptions

StayWell Consumer Health Publishing
1 Atlantic St., Suite 604, Stamford, CT 06901
888-456-1222, ext. 31106 (toll-free)
203-653-6266
ddewitt@staywell.com

Corporate Sales and Licensing

StayWell Consumer Health Publishing
1 Atlantic St., Suite 604, Stamford, CT 06901
jmitchell@staywell.com

Editorial Correspondence

E-mail mental_letter@hms.harvard.edu
Letters Harvard Mental Health Letter
10 Shattuck St., 2nd Floor, Boston, MA 02115

Permissions

Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.
Online www.copyright.com

Published by Harvard Health Publications,
a division of Harvard Medical School

Editor in Chief Anthony L. Komaroff, MD
Publishing Director Edward Coburn

© 2011 Harvard University (ISSN 0884-3783)
Proceeds support the research efforts of Harvard Medical School.

Harvard Health Publications
10 Shattuck St., 2nd Floor, Boston, MA 02115

The goal of the Harvard Mental Health Letter is to interpret timely mental health information. Its contents are not intended to provide advice for individual problems. Such advice should be offered only by a person familiar with the detailed circumstances in which the problem arises. We are interested in comments and suggestions about the content; unfortunately, we cannot respond to all inquiries.

PUBLICATIONS MAIL AGREEMENT NO. 40906010
RETURN UNDELIVERABLE CANADIAN ADDRESSES TO:
CIRCULATION DEPT., 1415 JANETTE AVENUE,
WINDSOR, ON N8X 1Z1 • E-mail: ddewitt@staywell.com

Gratitude *continued*

comfortable expressing concerns about their relationship.

Managers who remember to say “thank you” to people who work for them may find that those employees feel motivated to work harder. Researchers at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania randomly divided university fund-raisers into two groups. One group made phone calls to solicit alumni donations in the same way they always had. The second group—assigned to work on a different day—received a pep talk from the director of annual giving, who told the fund-raisers she was grateful for their efforts. During the following week, the university employees who heard her message of gratitude made 50% more fund-raising calls than those who did not.

There are some notable exceptions to the generally positive results in research on gratitude. One study found that middle-aged divorced women who kept gratitude journals were no more satisfied with their lives than those who did not. Another study found that children and adolescents who wrote and delivered a thank-you letter to someone who made a difference in their lives may have made the other person happier—but did not improve their own well-being. This finding suggests that gratitude is an attainment associated with emotional maturity.

Ways to cultivate gratitude

Gratitude is a way for people to appreciate what they have instead of always reaching for something new in the hopes it will make them happier, or thinking they can't feel satisfied until every physical and material need is met. Gratitude helps people refocus on what they have instead of what they lack. And, although it may feel contrived at first, this mental state grows stronger with use and practice.

Here are some ways to cultivate gratitude on a regular basis.

Write a thank-you note. You can make yourself happier and nurture your relationship with another person by writing a thank-you letter expressing your enjoyment and appreciation of that per-

son's impact on your life. Send it, or better yet, deliver and read it in person if possible. Make a habit of sending at least one gratitude letter a month. Once in a while, write one to yourself.

Thank someone mentally. No time to write? It may help just to think about someone who has done something nice for you, and mentally thank the individual.

Keep a gratitude journal. Make it a habit to write down or share with a loved one thoughts about the gifts you've received each day.

Count your blessings. Pick a time every week to sit down and write about your blessings—reflecting on what went right or what you are grateful for. Sometimes it helps to pick a number—such as three to five things—that you will identify each week. As you write, be specific and think about the sensations you felt when something good happened to you.

Pray. People who are religious can use prayer to cultivate gratitude.

Meditate. Mindfulness meditation involves focusing on the present moment without judgment. Although people often focus on a word or phrase (such as “peace”), it is also possible to focus on what you're grateful for (the warmth of the sun, a pleasant sound, etc.). ♥

Emmons RA, et al. “Counting Blessings Versus Burdens: An Experimental Investigation of Gratitude and Subjective Well-Being in Daily Life,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (Feb. 2003): Vol. 84, No. 2, pp. 377–89.

Grant AM, et al. “A Little Thanks Goes a Long Way: Explaining Why Gratitude Expressions Motivate Prosocial Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (June 2010): Vol. 98, No. 6, pp. 946–55.

Lambert NM, et al. “Expressing Gratitude to a Partner Leads to More Relationship Maintenance Behavior,” *Emotion* (Feb. 2011): Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 52–60.

Sansone RA, et al. “Gratitude and Well Being: The Benefits of Appreciation,” *Psychiatry* (Nov. 2010): Vol. 7, No. 11, pp. 18–22.

Seligman MEP, et al. “Empirical Validation of Interventions,” *American Psychologist* (July–Aug. 2005): Vol. 60, No. 1, pp. 410–21.

For more references, please see www.health.harvard.edu/mentalextra.

Source: from Harvard Mental Health Letter, Harvard Health Publications, Copyright 2011 by President and Fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved.

Harvard authorizes you to view or download a single copy of the Harvard Content on EBSCOhost solely for your personal, noncommercial use if you include the following copyright notice: "Copyright, President and Fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved" and other copyright and proprietary rights notices which were contained in the Harvard Content. Reproduction and/or redistribution of the Harvard Content is expressly prohibited. Any special rules for the use of other items provided on EBSCOhost may be included elsewhere within the site and are incorporated into these Terms and Conditions.

The Harvard Content is protected by copyright under both United States and foreign laws. Title to the Harvard Content remains with President and Fellows, Harvard College. Any use of the Harvard Content not expressly permitted by these Terms and Conditions is a breach of these Terms and Conditions and may violate copyright, trademark, and other laws. Harvard Content and features are subject to change or termination without notice in the editorial discretion of Harvard. All rights not expressly granted herein are reserved to President and Fellows, Harvard College.

If you violate any of these Terms and Conditions, your permission to use the Harvard Content automatically terminates and you must immediately destroy any copies you have made of any portion of the Harvard Content.

MEDICAL DISCLAIMER

The information contained in this online site is intended to provide accurate and helpful health information for the general public. It is made available with the understanding that the author and publisher are not engaged in rendering medical, health, psychological, or any other kind of personal professional services on this site. The information should not be considered complete and does not cover all diseases, ailments, physical conditions or their treatment. It should not be used in place of a call or visit to a medical, health or other competent professional, who should be consulted before adopting any of the suggestions in this site or drawing inferences from it.

The information about drugs contained on this site is general in nature. It does not cover all possible uses, actions, precautions, side effects, or interactions of the medicines mentioned, nor is the information intended as medical advice for individual problems or for making an evaluation as to the risks and benefits of taking a particular drug.

The operator(s) of this site and the publisher specifically disclaim all responsibility for any liability, loss or risk, personal or otherwise, which is incurred as a consequence, directly or indirectly, of the use and application of any of the material on this site.