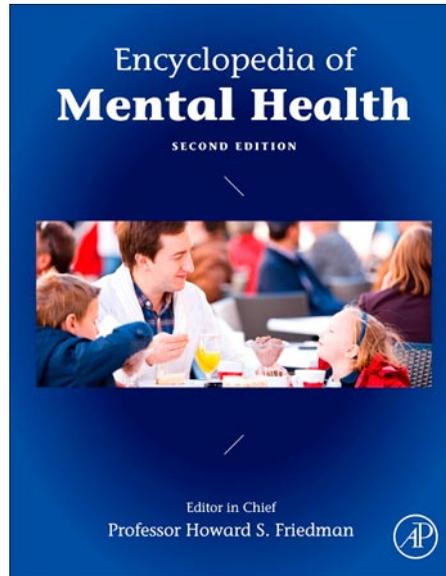


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Gratitude

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Glossary

Appreciation The general recognition of and attention to positive aspects of one's life.

Experiment A scientific study in which participants are randomly assigned to a treatment condition (e.g., write a gratitude letter) versus a neutral control condition (e.g., write about your day), thus allowing causal inferences about the conditions to be made.

Gratitude The recognition of a positive outcome from an external source, including a felt sense of wonder or thankfulness for benefits received.

Mediation A theory or statistical model that attempts to explain the underlying factor that explains the relationship between two variables (e.g., that gratitude promotes health because it stimulates people to engage in healthy behaviors).

Introduction

The value of gratitude has been recognized for centuries. Early philosophers, as well as all of the major world religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism), emphasize the importance of gratitude in their teachings (Harpham, 2004). Modern cultural practices, such as teaching children to say 'thank you' at an early age and devoting an entire national holiday to being thankful, demonstrate that the value of gratitude has persisted beyond ancient philosophy and religious instruction and that it continues to permeate modern cultural norms and institutions. Despite the apparent relevance of gratitude to both ancient and modern religious, philosophical, and cultural traditions, researchers in the field of psychology have only begun to investigate gratitude within the past few decades, suggesting that gratitude has a relatively short scientific history despite its long past (Emmons, 2004).

What is Gratitude?

Unlike other psychological phenomena, gratitude has an incredibly broad classification – it has been characterized as a transient emotional state, a stable personality trait, and a moral virtue, as well as a habit, a coping response, and an attitude (Emmons, 2008; Emmons *et al.*, 2003). Lay definitions of gratitude are broad as well, including feelings of gratitude for specific people and for specific kind acts, as well as a more general appreciation for the positive aspects of one's life (Lambert *et al.*, 2009). Despite these sweeping lay conceptions, psychological scientists have distinguished between gratitude and the more general construct of appreciation. Most commonly, gratitude is defined as the recognition of a positive outcome from an external source, including a felt sense of wonder or thankfulness for benefits received (Emmons, 2004; Emmons and McCullough, 2003; Roberts, 2004). By this definition, individuals feel gratitude toward friends who take care of them when they are sick, but they feel appreciation for the first signs of spring after a cold winter.

The distinction between gratitude and appreciation largely rests on the presence (or lack) of an interpersonal context. Gratitude involves an interpersonal exchange and recognition

of a specific benefit conferred, whereas appreciation entails a general sense of gratitude for the blessings in one's life (Adler and Fagley, 2005). Other researchers distinguish between gratitude and appreciation by using terms like personal gratitude (Steindl-Rast, 2004) or benefit-triggered gratitude (Lambert *et al.*, 2009) to refer to specific features of gratitude, and by using terms like transpersonal gratefulness (Steindl-Rast, 2004) or generalized gratitude (Lambert *et al.*, 2009) to refer to the broader qualities of appreciation. Although gratitude and appreciation are notably related constructs associated with mental health, this article will focus primarily on gratitude as defined above and not on the broader construct of appreciation.

The most common approaches to studying gratitude involve investigating it either as a trait or as an emotion. As a trait or disposition, gratitude reflects individuals' generalized tendencies to experience gratitude in their daily lives (Emmons *et al.*, 2003). Paragons of trait gratitude experience gratitude frequently, intensely, and through a wide range of eliciting stimuli. As an emotion, gratitude refers to the specific feelings that individuals experience in response to a benefit. Evidence from both approaches indicates that gratitude is consistently linked with superior mental health.

Gratitude and Mental Health

A grateful disposition has been linked with superior mental health outcomes – both in terms of the absence of psychopathology and the presence of psychological well-being. Measured as a trait, gratitude is associated with experiencing fewer depressive symptoms (Lambert *et al.*, 2012), accumulating less stress and lower rates of depression during a life transition (Wood *et al.*, 2008), and reporting greater well-being overall (Wood *et al.*, 2008, 2009). In addition, experimental evidence suggests that state gratitude plays a causal role in the development of these outcomes. Numerous studies have found that when people are randomly assigned to practice gratitude (relative to a neutral control activity), they demonstrate greater improvements in well-being (Boehm *et al.*, 2011; Emmons and McCullough, 2003; Froh *et al.*, 2008; Layous *et al.*, 2013; Lyubomirsky *et al.*, 2011; Lyubomirsky *et al.*, 2005; Seligman *et al.*, 2005).

Recent research has begun to shed light on the underlying mechanisms that explain why gratitude leads to beneficial mental health outcomes. Accordingly, studies have demonstrated that gratitude is associated with positive thoughts, positive feelings, and positive behaviors, and these factors, in turn, are linked to greater well-being.

Thoughts

Several studies have shown that gratitude is associated with more positive thoughts and perceptions about the world, suggesting that grateful people think about the world in more adaptive ways. For example, one study found that gratitude fosters positive reframing of situations – a pattern of thinking in which negative events are interpreted in a positive light (e.g., “My lay-off made me realize what a supportive family I have”; Lambert *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, these positive thought patterns engendered by gratitude have been subsequently linked to reductions in depressive symptoms over time (Lambert *et al.*, 2012).

Other work indicates that gratitude leads to positive thoughts about relationships specifically. For example, in one study, participants were instructed to express gratitude to a friend, to think grateful thoughts about a friend, to engage in positive interactions with a friend, or to think about their daily activities. Participants who expressed gratitude to a friend demonstrated bigger increases in perceived communal strength (i.e., feelings of responsibility for a friend’s well-being) than in any of the other conditions (Lambert *et al.*, 2010). Similarly, in another study, expressions of gratitude to a friend led to more positive perceptions of that friend (Lambert and Fincham, 2011). Together, these studies provide evidence that expressing gratitude leads people to think about their lives and their relationships in mentally healthy ways.

In turn, these positive cognitions may mediate the relationship between gratitude and enhanced overall mental health and well-being. As noted above, positive reframing has been shown to reduce depressive symptoms (Lambert *et al.*, 2012; cf. Gotlib and Joormann, 2010), and several studies have linked it to other well-being outcomes, such as happiness or life satisfaction (e.g., see Lyubomirsky *et al.*, 2005). On the other hand, perceiving one’s relationships in positive ways likely improves people’s feelings of closeness and connectedness to others, and feelings of connectedness are an important predictor of psychological well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Feelings

In addition to facilitating more positive thoughts, research has also demonstrated that gratitude is linked to greater positive emotion and less negative emotion. In one study, trait gratitude was associated with experiencing more daily positive emotions and fewer negative emotions (Kashdan *et al.*, 2006), and experimental evidence suggests that this relationship is causal. For example, participants randomly assigned to count their blessings reported more positive emotions and enhanced feelings of connectedness to others over the course of 2 weeks (Emmons and McCullough, 2003). In another study, 6th and 7th grade students who were instructed to count their blessings

reported fewer negative emotions and greater satisfaction with their school experience over the course of 3 weeks (Froh *et al.*, 2008). Finally, penning weekly gratitude letters to people they were particularly grateful for led both Anglo-Americans and foreign-born Asian Americans to report greater satisfaction with their lives over the course of 6 weeks (Boehm *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, gratitude prompts people to feel more connected to others (Wood *et al.*, 2008), which, in turn, promotes greater boosts in well-being over time (Boehm *et al.*, 2011). In sum, the evidence suggests that gratitude leads adults, youth, and individuals from differing cultural backgrounds to report feeling more positively and less negatively about their lives.

The increases in positive affect and decreases in negative affect resulting from gratitude likely play a pivotal role in overall well-being improvements. Indeed, recent theory suggests that increases in positive emotions are among the primary mechanisms by which simple positive activities, like gratitude, enhance well-being (Lyubomirsky and Layous, 2013).

Behaviors

A burgeoning literature is demonstrating that cultivating gratitude gives rise to numerous positive behaviors. This work has primarily focused on actions that improve social relationships, such as relationship maintenance (Lambert *et al.*, 2010) and prosocial (Bartlett and DeSteno, 2006; Tsang, 2006) behavior. One study, for example, found that expressing gratitude to a friend led to increased comfort in voicing relationship concerns, relative to thinking about positive memories with their friend or simply thinking about why they are grateful for their friend (Lambert and Fincham, 2011). This finding highlights the power of gratitude to compel people to engage in behaviors to improve their social relationships.

In addition to relationship maintenance behaviors, gratitude has also been linked to prosocial behavior (McCullough *et al.*, 2002; McCullough *et al.*, 2001). Relative to people induced into a happy or amused mood, those induced to feel grateful are more likely to help both their benefactors and strangers (Bartlett and Desteno, 2006; Tsang, 2006). These studies indicate that gratitude moves people toward prosocial or reciprocal action.

Finally, preliminary evidence suggests that gratitude may be linked not only with behaviors to improve social relationships, but with behaviors to improve oneself. In one study, participants who were instructed to count their blessings spent significantly more time exercising (approximately 1.5 more hours per week) than participants who were instructed to count their hassles (Emmons and McCullough, 2003). Thus, it seems that gratitude may motivate self-improvement behaviors as well as relationship behaviors.

Each of the positive behaviors described above may benefit well-being for a variety of reasons. Relationship maintenance behaviors may elevate feelings of closeness and connectedness, which, in turn, are related to well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Previous literature has also shown kind acts (i.e., prosocial behavior) to elevate well-being (Sheldon *et al.*, 2012). Finally, exercise has also been linked with greater mental health and happiness (Bize *et al.*, 2007; Blumenthal *et al.*, 1999).

Beyond Mental Health: Gratitude and Self-Improvement

Theory suggests that gratitude should serve as a motivator of general self-improvement. For example, several investigators have theorized that gratitude bolsters resources for coping with challenge (Emmons, 2007), as well as beneficial behaviors towards oneself (McCullough *et al.*, 2001) and efforts to use the gifts for which one is grateful (Harned, 1997). In addition, gratitude leads people to believe that they deserve positive outcomes for themselves and that they are capable of obtaining those outcomes (Lambert *et al.*, 2009). Together, these ideas suggest that gratitude will galvanize self-improvement actions. Furthermore, preliminary evidence has indicated that gratitude prompts people to strive and make progress toward their goals (Emmons and Mishra, 2011), and, as described above, one experiment showed that gratitude successfully increased the performance of one important self-improvement behavior – namely, exercise (Emmons and McCullough, 2003).

Summary

In sum, in only a few decades, gratitude research has demonstrated the numerous benefits of gratitude for mental health and wellness. As discussed above, gratitude appears to have protective benefits against mental illness (Wood *et al.*, 2008; see also, Layous *et al.*, 2014), as well as beneficial effects for social relationships (Lambert *et al.*, 2010), psychological well-being (Froh *et al.*, 2008), and physical health (Emmons and McCullough, 2003). A strength of this work involves the use of experimental designs, affording researchers the ability to draw causal conclusions about the role of gratitude in mental health. Yet, many questions remain regarding how, why, and in what circumstances gratitude promotes positive outcomes. In the future, in addition to identifying the specific mechanisms underlying the effect of gratitude on well-being, research could explore specific circumstances or contexts that render gratitude practices to be more or less effective. For example, gratitude may diminish, rather than improve, well-being when it leads people to feel guilty or indebted.

Final Words

Whether gratitude is considered a trait or an emotion, its benefits extend to multiple aspects of positive functioning, including positive thoughts, positive feelings, and positive behaviors. In turn, these thoughts, feelings, and behaviors continue to support mental health, well-being, and even self-improvement. In sum, growing scientific evidence suggests that expressing gratitude on a regular basis to friends and loved ones may help people achieve happy, healthy, and flourishing lives.

See also: Happiness and Subjective Well-Being. Hope. Optimism, Motivation, and Mental Health. Positive Psychology. The Science of Forgiveness: Examining the Influence of Forgiveness on Mental Health

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