

My Turn: The benefits of expressing gratitude

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During the month of November, many of us are typically more mindful about taking the time to express thanks and gratitude. When we feel grateful, dopamine is released into our brains. This makes us feel uplifted and acts as an anti-depressant.

In multiple studies on the link between gratitude and well-being, Robert Emmons, a gratitude researcher, found that gratitude effectively increases happiness and reduces depression.

Studies show that those who express gratitude frequently experience lasting changes in their brains as a result of a process called neuroplasticity. We can literally rewire our brains when we are consistently thankful.

Expressing gratitude also has other benefits to health. Those who write about their gratitude, for example, have been found to have increased sleep quality and reduced blood pressure. Including gratitude in programs for those recovering from heart surgeries has been found to lead to greater improvements in health-related quality of life and greater reductions in depression and anxiety.

Gratitude also impacts our relationships with those around us. Those who are more grateful are seen as trustworthy, social, and appreciative and have access to a wider social network, more friends, and better relationships on average.

These are only some of the many benefits of gratitude. With all these benefits, you would think that being grateful would be easy to do. Yet, because there are so many things to be grateful for that surround us every day, our brains become accustomed to

them and we start to take them for granted. As a result, it is important that we develop consistent ways to remind ourselves to be grateful.

One of the easiest and most popular ways to start to learn to express gratitude is to keep a “gratitude journal” and write down at least three things each day that you are grateful for. Your brain will gravitate toward the big things like family, health, or positive accomplishments. It is important to retrain your brain to also notice the things it has become accustomed to, like warm water, clouds, or colored pencils. Your list could also include things in your past, people in your life, or progress you have made.

Wayne Dyer, who was an inspirational writer and speaker, made a morning ritual popular to remind us to express gratitude. He suggested that upon waking every day that we should say “thank you” three times before getting out of bed. This ritual not only expresses our gratitude for the new day, it also primes our brains to be on the lookout for things to be thankful for throughout the day.

Another way to remind ourselves to be grateful is to set a daily alarm (or alarms) on our phones. My alarm goes off every day at 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. with songs that make me smile. When the song plays, I smile and am reminded that no matter what is happening in that moment, I can take the time to look around and be thankful for things I am doing and those I am with.

Expressing gratitude is simple. It is simply taking the time to consider all the positive things in life, big and small. Yet, it isn't easy because we are wired to notice the problems and negatives in life. It takes practice to develop an attitude of gratitude and sometimes we need the help of another person to change our perspectives.

This year, amidst the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, gratitude might be the furthest thing from your mind. But expressing gratitude is one of the most powerful methods of increasing happiness. It is more important than ever that we learn about the benefits of gratitude and commit to expressing gratitude despite the challenges in the world around us.

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