



DISCOVERING THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING BENEFITS OF GRATITUDE

“...there’s a gratitude circuit in your brain, badly in need of a workout. Strengthening that circuit brings the power to elevate your physical and mental health, boost happiness, improve sleep, and help you feel more connected to other people.”

–The Upward Spiral, Alex Korb, PhD.

Sounds like a magic pill, doesn’t it? Today, however, we are fortunate to have research demonstrating the outcomes cited above and evidence-based techniques to achieve them. There are multiple definitions of “gratitude” supporting an affirmation of what’s good in our lives and experiencing a profound appreciation for what we consider valuable and meaningful. In positive psychology research, gratitude is considered a strength and is strongly associated with happiness and well-being. Studies in contemporary neuroscience correlate gratitude with activating multiple regions of the brain

including relief of a stressor (create resilience) and releasing neurochemicals to aid in the motivation of goal accomplishment (health and wellness).

The PRACTICE of Gratitude The word “practice” can’t be overlooked when discovering the health and well-being benefits of gratitude. The benefits derived from a sustained practice of gratitude prove to be positive, significant and multifaceted. Gratitude:

- Promotes healing, strengthens our immune system, lowers blood pressure, reduces symptoms of illness and increases pain thresholds.
- Creates resilience by fostering greater mental, emotional and physical health and well-being.
- Generates more positive social behaviors, buffering against negativity-bias, bolstering teamwork and broadening our attention to positive emotions.

Whether trying to eat healthier, exercise more or recognize all we have to be grateful for, we often rely on old habits and ways of thinking that inhibit the benefits we seek. Deconstructing this old wiring (neural pathways) is virtually impossible. The simple fact our brain has a built-in negativity bias keeps us focused on what is or could go wrong. In clinical settings, this focus saves lives! Interpersonally, as part of a caregiving team, this hardwiring can lead to a high degree of negativity, destroy trusting relationships, enable passive aggressive behaviors and, potentially, cause harm to patients.

Cue the Neuroscience Your brain views the workplace as a social system. When you feel unappreciated, pain regions of your brain are activated. Compound this with daily stress and you're caught in a downward spiral of negativity with long-term, harmful impact on your physical, emotional and mental health.

Good news—by shifting your brain's focus through a sustained gratitude practice, you'll begin to create new and to strengthen existing neural connections. The stronger your gratitude circuitry becomes, the better equipped you are to cope, heal and reenergize. A sustained practice of gratitude releases good neurochemicals—dopamine, serotonin and oxytocin—into your bloodstream.

- **Dopamine** triggers positive emotions, makes you feel more optimistic and fosters camaraderie.
- **Serotonin** enhances your mood, your willpower and motivation.
- **Oxytocin** facilitates trusting, prosocial behaviors while inhibiting the stress hormone cortisol.

How to Practice Gratitude

To practice gratitude with the greatest benefits:

- 1 Reflect on specific people, experiences and behaviors that are meaningful in your life.
- 2 Describe why you're grateful for the person, experience or behavior.
- 3 Describe the benefits and characterize the intentions, actions and possible sacrifices made by the giver.

Consider the following recommendations for an individual gratitude practice:

- Keep a gratitude journal. Journal up to three times a week, as journaling daily does not increase benefits.
- Express your gratitude through a description of specific physical, mental or emotional health for which you are thankful.
- Write a letter of gratitude to someone and deliver it or read it to them.
- Write down three good things that went well in your day and describe why.

Choose techniques that are most comfortable. With the changes in health care and the demands on you as a member of a caregiving team, your self-care and overall health is of utmost importance.

For Discussion

- What one action can you take today to tap into your own gratitude circuitry?
- What can your clinical team initiate today to create opportunities to promote gratitude?

About the Author: Linda Roszak Burton BS, BBC, ACC, is a Principal Consultant with Accordant Philanthropy and author of *Gratitude Heals ~ A Journal for Inspiration and Guidance*. You can reach her at Linda@AccordantPhilanthropy.com