



Leading Through COVID-19

GRATITUDE SUPPORTS WELL-BEING DURING COVID-19

“...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.

Now, more than ever, we are fortunate to have the science of gratitude with demonstrated health and well-being benefits and evidence-based techniques to achieve them. Gratitude can be an antidote to the stress and apprehension brought on by COVID-19 to physicians, nurses and support staff. With an even greater sense of overwhelm, physicians are seeking to identify effective strategies to take care of themselves and their teams as this pandemic unfolds.

Gratitude is defined as an affirmation of what’s good in our lives and as 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 human flourishing 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” is important when discovering the health and well-being benefits of gratitude—especially during this overwhelmingly busy time of crisis. 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.

At a time when stress and anxiety levels are at an all-time high because of COVID-19, we default to old habits and ways of thinking that inhibit the health and well-being benefits we seek for ourselves and our colleagues.

Deconstructing this old wiring (neural pathways) is virtually impossible. Our brain's 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 leads to a high degree of negativity, destroys trusting relationships, enables passive-aggressive behaviors and, potentially, causes 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 today's increased levels of stress and lack of sleep, 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 strengthen existing neural connections. The stronger your gratitude circuitry becomes, the better equipped you are to cope, heal and reenergize. Practicing gratitude releases good neurochemicals—dopamine, serotonin and oxytocin.

- **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 supporting you through this COVID-19 crisis.
- 2 Describe why you're grateful and how you've benefited from these.
- 3 Describe intentions, actions and possible sacrifices made by individuals or groups.

Consider the following gratitude practice recommendations:

- Keep a daily gratitude journal. Write down three good things that went well in your day and describe why.
- Start a shared gratitude journal for coworkers to express their gratitude.
- Start each huddle or rounding activity with an expression of gratitude.
- Express gratitude for your own physical, mental or emotional health.
- Write a letter of gratitude to someone and read it to them.

Choose techniques that are most comfortable. With the challenges of COVID-19 and the demands on you as a member of a caregiving team, your self-care and overall health are 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?*

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