

# Gratitude as a Psychotherapeutic Intervention

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Gratitude practice can be a catalyzing and relational healing force, often untapped in clinical practice. In this article, we provide an overview of current thinking about gratitude's defining and beneficial properties, followed by a brief review of the research on mental health outcomes that result from gratitude practice. Following an analysis of our case study of the use of gratitude as a psychotherapeutic intervention, we present various self-strategies and techniques for consciously choosing and cultivating gratitude. We conclude by describing ways in which gratitude might be capitalized upon for beneficial outcomes in therapeutic settings. © 2013 Wiley Periodicals, Inc. *J. Clin. Psychol. In Session* 69:846–855, 2013.

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Whether in terms of enhancing mental health or preventing mental illness, gratitude is one of life's most vitalizing ingredients. Clinical trials indicate that the practice of gratitude can have dramatic and lasting positive effects in a person's life. It can lower blood pressure, improve immune function, promote happiness and well-being, and spur acts of helpfulness, generosity, and cooperation. Additionally, gratitude reduces lifetime risk for depression, anxiety, and substance abuse disorders. Whether it stems from the acceptance of another's kindness, an appreciation for the majesty of nature, or a recognition of the gifts in one's own life, gratitude enhances nearly all spheres of human experience. Beyond its ability to create tangible benefits, so many people cherish simply feeling grateful for its own sake. Some of the best moments in life are those in which we sense we have been the beneficiary of goodness freely and generously bestowed onto us.

We begin by providing an overview of what gratitude is, followed by a brief review of the research on gratitude's mental health outcomes. Following an analysis of our case study, we present various techniques for cultivating gratitude and conclude by describing ways in which gratitude might be capitalized on for beneficial outcomes in therapeutic settings.

## *Defining Gratitude*

Gratitude has a dual meaning: a worldly one and a transcendent one. In its worldly sense, gratitude is a feeling that occurs in interpersonal exchanges when one person acknowledges receiving a valuable benefit from another. Gratitude is a cognitive-affective state that is typically associated with the perception that one has received a personal benefit that was not intentionally sought after, deserved, or earned but rather because of the good intentions of another person (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). The word gratitude is derived from the Latin *gratia*, meaning favor, and *gratus*, meaning pleasing. All derivatives from this Latin root have to do with kindness, generousness, gifts, the beauty of giving and receiving, or getting something for nothing. Much of human life is about giving, receiving, and repaying benefits and kindnesses. In this sense, gratitude functions to help regulate relationships by solidifying, affirming, and strengthening them.

Feelings of gratitude are anchored in two essential pieces of information processed by an individual: (a) an affirming of goodness or "good things" in one's life and (b) the recognition

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that the sources of this goodness lie at least partially outside the self. It is a natural emotional reaction and quite likely a universal tendency to respond positively to another's benevolence, or at least in violation of the law of reciprocity, not responding to kindness with harm. There is a potent, vitalizing energy that accompanies both the affirmation and recognition components of gratitude and helps account for its transformational healing power in human functioning.

The transcendent meaning of gratitude is widely recognized in the major spiritual traditions in which thanksgiving is a worldwide response to life. This fundamental spiritual quality to gratitude, which is at the core of every major religious tradition, is aptly conveyed by Streng (1989): "In this attitude people recognize that they are connected to each other in a mysterious and miraculous way that is not fully determined by physical forces, but is part of a wider, or transcendent context" (p. 5). This spiritual core of gratefulness is essential if gratitude is to be not simply a tool for narcissistic self-improvement. True gratefulness rejoices in the other. Its ultimate goal is to reflect back the goodness that one has received by creatively seeking opportunities for giving. The motivation for doing so resides in the grateful appreciation that one has lived by the grace of others. In this sense, the spirituality of gratitude is opposed to a self-serving belief that one deserves or is entitled to the blessings that he or she enjoys. Rather, it is knowing the grace by which one lives that is itself a profound spiritual realization. Authentic gratitude leads people to experience life situations in ways that call forth from them an openness to engage with the world to share and increase the very goodness they have received. It is the feeling of connection with humanity emerging from a sense of wonder and joy that participating in an intricate network of existence brings.

Gratitude has been well established as a universal human attribute. Its presence is felt and expressed in different ways by virtually all peoples, of all cultures, worldwide. The fact that gratitude is universal across all cultures suggests that it is part of the fabric of human nature. A positive affirmation of life comes from a deep sense of gratitude to all forms of existence, a gratitude rooted in the essence of being itself, which permeates one's every thought, speech, and action. Gratitude, in this profound sense, is not simply a mere attitude, a deep feeling, or even a desirable virtue. It is as elemental as life itself. In many world ethical systems, gratitude is the shaping and compelling force behind acts of compassion because life is seen as a vast network of interdependence, interpenetration, and mutuality that constitutes being.

### *Gratitude as a Healing Affect*

The possibilities of gratitude within clinical contexts can be viewed within the framework of accelerated experiential dynamic therapy (ADEPT; Fosha, 2005; Russell & Fosha, 2008). Gratitude is inherently relational and occurs in response to being esteemed and affirmed by the other leading to expressions of love and tenderness toward the other. Within this theoretical perspective, gratitude is one of the "healing effects" that are part of a broader category of positive transformational feelings. The other-directed healing effects of gratitude, love, and tenderness arise in interpersonal contexts and facilitate the process of bringing closure to old hurts that, in turn, alleviates emotional suffering.

According to ADEPT, the healing effects arise when we feel recognized, affirmed, and esteemed; strengthened to do what was once too frightening to do before; and when we become aware of the aspects of emotional experience that were previously feared or blocked from awareness. As such, gratitude often becomes an important dynamic between therapist and client after such experiences; in addition, the healing power of gratitude from patient to therapist can be drawn upon to facilitate the therapeutic encounter, and to enliven the capacity of the patient to not only feel gratitude but also to express it. In this manner, the patient benefits from the co-created therapeutic space to advance treatment and his or her sense of self.

"Contrast" is an integral aspect of the healing effects; contrast also often sets the stage for the experience of gratitude. Painfulness is often followed by the redemption of healing (Eigen, 1996). Affliction or suffering are redeemed by the recognition of goodness received, accompanied by powerful feelings of relief and gratitude. Contrasting the present with negative times in the past can increase feelings of happiness and enhance one's overall sense of well-being. One's current state is constantly being compared with what has been experienced in the past or what one

desired to have happen. One greatly appreciates a mild spring after a harsh winter, a gourmet meal after a fast, and sexual intimacy after a period of abstinence. Some blessings are not known until they are lost. Losing some aspects of one's life may lead the person to increase the value they see in other aspects of life.

Gratitude arises within other aspects of the therapeutic relationship. Consider gift giving. The act of giving and receiving a gift can be fraught with a widely divergent assortment of perceptions, psychological states, and conflicting emotions. The complications of gift giving and expressions of gratitude within therapy have been discussed elsewhere (Knox, 2008). Most therapists feel conflicted about receiving gifts from their patients; they are unaware of the powerful and important effect that being able to give to a therapist has for the patient's self esteem. The therapist's receiving the patient's affirmation allows patients to acknowledge and validate their own resources and emotional capacities. The therapist's capacity to accept the gift of the client's gratitude allows the patient to have an experience of his or her own goodness and worth and the ability to have a positive and significant effect on another, or what Shelton (2010) referred to as a "giving away of the goodness."

### *Gratitude as a Psychotherapeutic Intervention*

A number of rigorous, controlled experimental trials have examined the benefits of gratitude. Gratitude has one of the strongest links to mental health and satisfaction with life of any personality trait—more so than even optimism, hope, or compassion. Grateful people experience higher levels of positive emotions such as joy, enthusiasm, love, happiness, and optimism, and gratitude as a discipline protects us from the destructive impulses of envy, resentment, greed, and bitterness. People who experience gratitude can cope more effectively with everyday stress, show increased resilience in the face of trauma-induced stress, recover more quickly from illness, and enjoy more robust physical health. Taken together, these results indicate that gratitude is incompatible with negative emotions and pathological conditions and that it may even offer protection against psychiatric disorders.

Gratitude has been scientifically examined at the level of emotion by asking people to cultivate it through journaling exercises (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Gratitude intervention research has relied mainly on getting people to recollect events from the past that help induce gratitude. Recent research has demonstrated that mood and health benefits can accrue from grateful thinking cultivated in this manner. In these experimental studies, persons who were randomly assigned to keep gratitude journals on a weekly basis exercised more regularly, reported fewer physical symptoms, felt better about their lives as a whole, and were more optimistic about the upcoming week compared with those who recorded hassles or neutral life events (Emmons & McCullough, 2003, Study 1).

A daily gratitude journal-keeping exercise with young adults resulted in higher reported levels of the positive states of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, attentiveness, and energy compared with a focus on hassles or a downward social comparison (ways in which participants thought they were better off than others; Emmons & McCullough, 2003, Study 2). Participants in the daily gratitude condition were more likely to report having helped someone with a personal problem or having offered emotional support to another, relative to the hassles or social comparison condition. This indicates that, relative to a focus on complaints, an effective strategy for producing reliably higher levels of pleasant affect is to lead people to reflect, on a daily basis, on those aspects of their lives for which they are grateful. Other benefits have extended to the physical realm, including longer sleep and improved sleep quality and more time spent exercising for those keeping gratitude journals (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

In these studies, participants in the gratitude condition are given the following instructions: "We want to focus for a moment on benefits or gifts that you have received in your life. These gifts could be simple everyday pleasures, people in your life, personal strengths or talents, moments of natural beauty, or gestures of kindness from others. We might not normally think about these things as gifts, but that is how we want you to think about them. Take a moment to really savor or relish these gifts, think about their value, and then write them down every night before going to sleep." A wide range of experiences sparked gratitude: cherished interactions, awareness of

physical health, overcoming obstacles, and simply being alive, to name a few. This instructional set was in contrast with comparison condition groups who were asked to chronicle their daily travails or hassles or to reflect on ways in which they were better off than others.

Importantly, these data showing that gratitude is correlated with beneficial outcomes are not limited to self-reports. Notably, the family, friends, partners, and others that surround them consistently report that people who practice gratitude seem measurably happier and are more pleasant to be around. Grateful people are rated by others as more helpful, outgoing, optimistic, and trustworthy (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002).

The benefits of gratitude were further confirmed in another study that compared the efficacy of five different interventions that were hypothesized to increase personal happiness and decrease personal depression (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). In a random assignment, placebo-controlled Internet study, a gratitude intervention (writing and delivering a letter of thankfulness to someone who had been especially helpful but had never been properly thanked) was found to significantly increase happiness and decrease depression for up to 1 month after the visit. Results indicated that “participants in the gratitude visit condition showed the largest positive changes in the whole study” (Seligman et al., 2005, p. 417).

Research has also shown that gratitude or thankfulness can be increased as a function of interventions designed for other purposes. For example, meditation can promote gratitude as a quality of mindfulness (Shapiro, Schwartz, & Santerre, 2002), progressive muscle relaxation can help produce increased feelings of love and thankfulness (Khasky & Smith, 1999), and merely imagining being forgiven by one’s victim can increase feelings of gratitude, presumably by making one grateful for being given the gift of forgiveness (Witvliet, Ludwig, & Bauer, 2002). These studies demonstrate that interventions aimed at increasing one’s focus on the relationship between mind and body can also help engender grateful mindsets in people. In fact, a particular type of psychotherapy originating in Japan, known as Naikan therapy, orchestrates all of the above techniques so as to expand clients’ awareness of their moral relationships with others (in terms of giving, receiving, and hurting) and aims to induce in clients a strong sense of gratitude to people who have provided them with benefits (Hedstrom, 1994; Reynolds, 1983).

But cultivating gratitude in the short term is not the same thing as having the ability to feel grateful on a consistent basis. Gratitude is not just a transient emotion, but it is also a virtue. Grateful people are more prone to the emotion, are prone to respond with gratitude to a wider range of beneficent actions, and are more likely to notice beneficence on the part of others—in particular, they are more likely to respond to it with the emotion of gratitude rather than with alternative emotions like resentment, shame, or guilt. Grateful people are likely to agree with statements such as “It’s important to appreciate each day that you are alive,” “I often reflect on how much easier my life is because of the efforts of others,” and “For me, life is much more of a gift than it is a burden.” Phrases such as these come from personality questionnaires designed to measure trait levels of gratitude—in other words, to identify people who are by nature grateful souls. Research has shown that dispositionally grateful people enjoy many of the same benefits that accrue from cultivating grateful thinking, namely, enhanced psychological, physical, spiritual, and relational well-being (McCullough et al., 2002).

## Case Illustration

### *Presenting Problem and Client Description*

Although there is nothing that can take away the pain and trauma of having been deceived by a loved one, the practice of gratitude can provide the basis of a process of healing. The second author’s (RS) patient, Susanna, was an attractive 35-year-old woman, who was warm, chatty, and personable. As she walked into the office, Susanna let her know that she was seeking treatment because she was torn between staying in her marriage—which she described as vacant—or leaving her husband and disrupting everything she had worked to build for her family, including the privileged lives of their three children.

Susanna entered therapy seeking “practical” help. She loved the larger life she and her husband had created: their social networks, their travels, the homes they built, and, most importantly,

their time with their children as a family. She wanted therapy to help her make psychological space to concentrate on the positive aspects of her life—just like she did as a child—and allow the negative aspects to recede into the background.

Soon after Susanna began treatment, her husband was in a motorcycle accident during one of their mini-vacations with a group of friends in the Florida Keys. While he lay critically ill in the hospital, one of their friends, a younger woman, came to visit him and, in tears, confessed that she and Susanna's husband had been having an affair for years.

As if that weren't devastating enough, Susanna, in a meeting with the accountant and the lawyers while her husband remained comatose, discovered that her husband had in fact depleted most of their savings and she had no idea where the money was or how it was spent. After several weeks she began to get phone calls demanding money that led her to the explanation: her husband had been addicted to gambling.

In shock, Susanna needed help pulling it all together. Suddenly, her affluent lifestyle—private schools, luxury vacations, indulgent shopping—was over. As was her vision for her future. She still had her two young children to raise, a career to manage, and now had to decide when (she was long past “whether or not”) to get divorced. And she had no money.

Susanna grew up in a suburb of Washington DC, the older child of a wealth management guru. Susanna had a younger brother who, by all accounts, was always much more “normal” than she was. Their mom was a pianist and one of their favorite family activities was going to mom's recitals. Mom was dependent on dad for all income, but loved the job of homemaker and was able to practice her beloved piano daily just as soon as the kids were all off to school. Mom would often say they had so much to be grateful for. She wanted Susanna and her brother to grow up with that perspective. She encouraged the perspective of gratitude not only in daily reminders but also in annual giving to “less fortunate” families in other countries and volunteer work in an underserved school community in the northeast part of town.

Dad was a larger-than-life rather dashing figure, and there was no doubt that Susanna was daddy's little girl. He was very expressive, warm, and loving. Mom was a bit more reserved in her affection; she was very critical of Susanna but at the same time she promoted her accomplishments and encouraged her professional life. Susanna withered under her mother's judgmental comments but always felt blessed to have parents so interested in her life and in her future, parents who were generous beyond imagination even as they sometimes drove her crazy with conflicts resulting from their different personal styles. Susanna preferred to concentrate on the “good parts.” She had a great childhood!

### *Case Formulation*

Moving psychologically from a platform of stability to one of insecurity was not easy for Susanna. Suddenly, the life she knew and the husband she thought she could count on were gone. It is not a reach to say that she was experiencing traumatic stress. While no single, sudden event hijacked her life, the weeks during which she discovered the cheating, gambling, and deception were a constellation of traumatic moments.

Susanna was not given to the introspective exploration of feelings and motives that therapy conventionally relies on. Nor was it likely that she was going to develop such complex capacities in a state of traumatic stress. The major resource that Susanna brought to the treatment was an idiosyncratic sense of “gratitude” toward her circumstances and in her intimate relationships.

Throughout Susanna's childhood, her parents provided a responsive and sustained matrix that supported development of capacities for self-righting, self-soothing, and self-esteem regulation. But relationships with others and with one's self make use of a “currency” (Lester Lenoff, personal communication, 2011), a familiar mode of relating through which a person's underlying self-system is expressed. In Susanna's case, the currency was the expression of gratitude. Her subjective sense of essential goodness took on the persona of actively recognizing the responsiveness her parents had provided, articulating this in explicit forms to herself, and enacting it with others.

An example of Susanna's persona of gratitude emerged in her career choice. From the time Susanna was a child, she loved the movies and—lucky enough and talented enough to get into

NYU film school—she began an early career as a screenwriter and film director, focusing on films with themes around women and empowerment. Her narratives typically involved women who achieved success. But in addition to an enjoyment of their empowerment, these characters expressed explicit gratitude for having been given a chance to succeed.

### *Course of Treatment*

Susanna's initial response was to view the crisis from mother's critical perspective, focusing on having allowed herself to become complacent in a situation that lacked realistic stability. But then, to self-right herself, Susanna chose the currency with which she had expressed her childhood sense of emotional stability. She began to shift her focus from the material crisis and self-recrimination to a context of thinking about all she still had in her life, as well as a stance of gratitude for the opportunities that remained open to her.

Susanna could not deny the material problems that emerged. But she "chose" unconsciously, and supported consciously, to construct a context of gratitude—and the positive affect that came with it—as a means to support her continued functioning.

The clinical approach adopted began with the principle, associated with the practice of social work, to accept and begin with the client "where she is at." In Susanna's case this involved reflecting, on a regular basis, her spontaneous expressions of gratitude and their importance in maintaining her internal balance and interpersonal functioning.

Therapy did not involve contradicting Susanna's expressions of despair and stress with reminders of what she still had to be grateful for. Instead, noncritical listening and empathic responding would inevitably lead to a spontaneous expression of gratitude. At this point, her therapist could reflect to Susanna that, in a context that was empathically responsive and felt safe, through adopting a perspective that brought her sustained capacities and those opportunities still open to her, she was capable of self-righting. From a self-righted position, she was able to restore her functioning despite the problems that faced her. It proved meaningful at the time and ultimately quite therapeutic for Susanna to integrate this capacity into moments in her daily life, and to string these moments together into the construction of a new life.

### *Outcome and Prognosis*

Susanna was able, in response to the approach described, to maintain her functioning sufficiently to reorganize her life adaptively to her changed circumstances. Throughout the process the combination of therapy and the capacity to reorganize around the theme of gratitude allowed her to remain emotionally available to her children and to maintain their own functioning at home, in school, and with friends.

Susanna has remained in therapy. As the crisis has been resolved, she has become more accessible to introspection into the sources of her ways of functioning, including using her gratitude defensively to avoid confronting dysfunctional situations, such as her former marriage.

### *Clinical Practices and Summary*

As to the content of Susanna's treatment, her characteristic stance of gratitude is idiosyncratic and not available as a resource in all treatments. What this treatment does suggest for reflection are two concepts: one longstanding and one that arose in retrospective thinking about this case. In situations of crisis, the client's resources and capacities that remain accessible provide a starting point. Noncritical listening and empathic responsiveness tend to facilitate the spontaneous emergence of moments bringing the resource and its support of adaptive functioning to the foreground. A combination of clinical clarification and support through explanation of the way a capacity supports functioning can provide a basis for recovery.

In addition, Susanna's treatment reflects the manner in which each client, growing up in a specific family and cultural context, constructs a currency—a persisting combination of ideation, associated affect, and behavior. This currency functions as the basis on which a person explains herself to herself and negotiates the interpersonal environment. Awareness of this currency can

facilitate coming to an understanding of the client and explaining what a therapist has come to understand in a way that serves to restore functioning and, when possible, leads to further psychological growth.

Whatever might emerge when, and if, Susanna chooses to introspect and explore her subjective experience, we know she was in crisis, leaving herself and her children at emotional risk. Her initial response was to view the crisis from her mother's critical perspective, focusing on having allowed herself to become complacent in a situation that lacked realistic stability. But then, to self-right herself, Susanna chose the currency with which she had expressed her childhood sense of emotional stability. She began to shift her focus from the material crisis and self-recrimination to a context of thinking about all she still had in her life, and to a stance of gratitude for the opportunities that remained open to her.

Susanna could not deny the material problems that emerged. But she "chose" unconsciously and supported consciously to construct a context of gratitude—and the positive affect that came with it—as a means to support her continued functioning. Her gratitude was not a selective, positive thinking facade, but rather a deep and steadfast trust where goodness ultimately dwells even in the face of uncertainty. This thanksgiving was grounded in the actuality that true gratitude is a force that arises from the realities of the world, which all too often include heartbreak, sometimes overpowering heartbreak.

It proved meaningful at the time and ultimately quite therapeutic for Susanna to practice gratitude in a variety of small ways and to string these moments together into the construction of a new life.

Gratitude is a sustainable approach to life that can be freely chosen for oneself if a successful person sets into motion self-renewing processes that produce downstream desirable outcomes. Ultimately, gratitude does not depend upon objective life circumstances. According to the late devotional writer and psychologist Henri Nouwen (1992):

Gratitude as a discipline involves a conscious choice. I can choose to be grateful even when my emotions and feelings are steep and hurt and resentful. It is amazing how many occasions present themselves in which I can choose gratitude instead of a complaint. I can choose to be grateful when I am criticized, even when my heart responds in bitterness . . . I can choose to listen to the voices that forgive and to look at the faces that smile, even while I still hear words of revenge and see grimaces of hatred. (p. 84)

This does not mean that the ability to live gratefully comes easily or naturally. Gratitude must be consciously cultivated, as Susanna did. The soil from which it sprouts must be fertile. She did not succumb to victimhood. She chose gratitude.

By writing each day, we magnify and expand on these sources of goodness. Setting aside time on a daily basis to recall moments of gratitude associated with even mundane or ordinary events, personal attributes one has, or valued people one encounters has the potential to weave together a sustainable life theme of gratefulness just as it nourishes a fundamentally affirming life stance. A deep and abiding gratefulness, the ability to relish the little pleasures that common occurrences afford, is a desirable human quality. Yet inasmuch as gratitude typically is a *response* to a gift, how can one actually cultivate it as a disposition?

Because of numerous obstacles, gratitude, at least initially, requires discipline. So this is the paradox of gratitude: Although the evidence is clear that cultivating gratitude, in our life and in our attitude towards life, makes us happier and healthier people, more attuned to the flow of blessings in our lives, it is still difficult. Practicing gratitude is easier said than done. A number of evidence-based strategies, including journaling and letter writing, have proven effective in creating sustainable gratefulness. At this point we step back to see what general features these strategies share. In thematically keeping with the focus of this special issue, gratitude can be thought of as a mindfulness practice that leads to a greater experience of being connected to life and awareness of all the available benefits.

One of the first steps in gratitude practice is attention. Attention is noticing and becoming aware of blessings that we normally take for granted. It is tuning into the many reasons for gratitude that already exist in our lives. Simultaneously, directing our attention this way in a focused manner blocks thoughts and perceptions that are inimical to gratitude, such as feelings of exaggerated deservingness or perceptions of victimhood. Focusing techniques that enhance attentiveness (such as mindfulness meditation) will be effective in increasing one's appreciation for the simple blessings of life and in banishing incompatible thoughts from consciousness.

The act of writing, of systematically recording blessings, translates a person's thoughts into words, and writing has been shown to have advantages over just thinking the thoughts. Writing helps to organize thoughts, facilitate integration, and helps individuals accept their own experiences and put them into context. It also enables the creation of meaning by placing everyday experiences within a framework of gifts and gratefulness. Gratitude journaling may bring a new and redemptive frame of reference to a difficult life situation. Here are some comments made by clients suffering from mild depression when asked to keep a gratitude journal:

- When I'm sinking and get caught up in my problems, it helps me rise above it.
- It keeps me in touch with reality out there rather than my constant negative interpretations. I remember that others are there and can be supportive.
- Helps me get out of the negative and remember that not all is lost.
- I am reminded that there is more to feel good about than to feel bad about.
- I stop taking the good in my life for granted and get out of my shell.
- I actually FEEL better when I am thinking about all the gifts I have in my life.
- Being grateful for all the wonderful people in my life makes me happy and more positive.
- Being grateful takes a conscious act of will. It is hard but really worth it.
- Writing about good things rather than bad things in my life makes me feel lighter inside.
- Gratitude keeps me going in the tough times.

Gratitude practice is systematically paying attention to what is going right in one's life, to see the contributions that others make in these good things, and then expressing gratitude verbally and behaviorally. Gratitude practice is intentionally shifting your attention from the negative to the positive and allowing your inner voice to speak that truth. Gratitude practice is acknowledging that even difficult and painful moments are our teachers and we can be grateful for them. The ability to perceive the elements (negative and positive) in one's life, and even life itself, as gifts, would appear essential if tragedies can be transformed into healing opportunities. Cultivating this level of gratitude allows healing from past wounds and a look to the future with a fresh affirmation toward life. Recent years have seen an explosive increase in research on stress-related growth and trauma-induced transformation. Unexpected capacities emerge, existing relationships once taken for granted become more precious, awareness and insight into what really matters in life is realized, and spiritual senses are heightened.

### How Unique Are Gratitude Interventions?

An important issue to be addressed in future research concerns the unique contributions that gratitude interventions make to well-being outcomes that distinguish them from related happiness interventions. The uniqueness of these interventions could be compared with other positive psychological constructs such as forgiveness and hope, both of which have been shown to contribute to well-being (Bono & McCullough, 2006; Snyder, Rand & Sigmon, 2002). Positive emotions like gratitude widen the scope of attention, broaden behavioral repertoires, and alter people's minds and bodies in a positive direction as they are associated with increased immune function, cardiovascular benefits, lower cortisol in response to stress, reduced risk of stroke, and shorter and less frequent episodes of depression (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005).

Broadened mindsets carry indirect and long-term adaptive value because broadening builds enduring personal resources, like social connections, coping strategies, and environmental knowledge. Positive emotions and a broad thought-action repertoire amplify each other, leading to an



*upward* spiral of well-being. Positive emotions broaden people's ability to consider a wider range of behavioral options, and increase resiliency while undoing the effects of negative emotions.

What's different about gratitude? First, the underlying prosocial and relational nature of gratitude, subsequently leading to social bonds, might facilitate unique pathways to well-being unlike many other positive emotions that tend to be relatively independent of social interactions. Second, gratitude has a fulfillment aspect to it, unlike hope, that might facilitate extraction of benefits via mindful appreciation of both present and past-received benefits. For example, given that hope is a positive motivational state driven by goal-directed energy and planning towards reaching future goal(s) (Snyder, 2000, p. 8), it probably reaches its fruition only in a prospective fashion in the absence of a desired goal—a goal which may or may not be attained.

### Conclusion: The Transformational Possibilities of Gratitude

Does gratitude work as a psychotherapeutic intervention? The evidence to date suggests that it does. Gratitude is a key, underappreciated quality in the clinical practice of psychology, its relevance deriving from its strong, unique, and causal relationship with well-being, as well as its dynamic healing influence on the therapist-patient relationship.

Clinically relevant positive characteristics such as optimism have a long lineage in clinical and health research, and have already been integrated into established practice. The inclusion of measures of gratitude and appreciation into randomized controlled trials of clinical treatments may demonstrate whether the treatment is effective in increasing positive functioning—a too-often overlooked outcome in clinical research that has primarily, and sometimes exclusively, focused on therapy's ability to reduce negative functioning.

Having rarely been the focus of process-oriented clinical interest, a major therapeutic resource has gone untapped. As in the case of Susanna, gratitude is both a preexisting key strength with which the client can draw upon for healing as well as an emerging quality stemming from the therapeutic relationship between client and therapist. As such, gratitude may spontaneously catalyze healing processes. Relatively easy techniques can be included to increase gratitude alongside existing clinical interventions.

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