

Highlights from the Research Project on Gratitude and Thankfulness

Dimensions and Perspectives of Gratitude

Co-Investigators: Robert A. Emmons, University of California, Davis

(contact: raemmons@ucdavis.edu; 530.752.8844)

Michael E. McCullough, University of Miami

(contact: mikem@miami.edu; 305.284.8057)

Gratitude is the “forgotten factor” in happiness research. We are engaged in a long-term research project designed to create and disseminate a large body of novel scientific data on the nature of gratitude, its causes, and its potential consequences for human health and well-being. Scientists are latecomers to the concept of gratitude. Religions and philosophies have long embraced gratitude as an indispensable manifestation of virtue, and an integral component of health, wholeness, and well-being. Through conducting highly focused, cutting-edge studies on the nature of gratitude, its causes, and its consequences, we hope to shed important scientific light on this important concept. This document is intended to provide a brief, introductory overview of the major findings to date of the research project. For further information, please contact either of the project investigators. This project is supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation.

We are engaged in two main lines of inquiry at the present time: (1) developing methods to cultivate gratitude in daily life and assess gratitude’s effect on well-being, and (2) developing a measure to reliably assess individual differences in dispositional gratefulness.

Gratitude Interventions and Psychological and Physical Well-Being

- In an experimental comparison, those who kept 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 to those who recorded hassles or neutral life events (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).
- A related benefit was observed in the realm of personal goal attainment: Participants who kept gratitude lists were more likely to have made progress toward important personal goals (academic, interpersonal and health-based) over a two-month period compared to subjects in the other experimental conditions.
- A daily gratitude intervention (self-guided exercises) with young adults resulted in higher reported levels of the positive states of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, attentiveness and energy compared to a focus on hassles or a downward social comparison (ways in which participants thought they were better off than others). There was no difference in levels of unpleasant emotions reported in the three groups.
- 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.
- In a sample of adults with neuromuscular disease, a 21-day gratitude intervention resulted in greater amounts of high energy positive moods, a greater sense of feeling connected to others, more optimistic ratings of one’s life, and better sleep duration and sleep quality, relative to a control group.

Measuring the Grateful Disposition

- Most people report being grateful (an average rating of nearly 6 on a 7 point scale).

- Well-Being: Grateful people report higher levels of positive emotions, life satisfaction, vitality, optimism and lower levels of depression and stress. The disposition toward gratitude appears to enhance pleasant feeling states more than it diminishes unpleasant emotions. Grateful people do not deny or ignore the negative aspects of life.
- Prosociality: People with a strong disposition toward gratitude have the capacity to be empathic and to take the perspective of others. They are rated as more generous and more helpful by people in their social networks (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002).
- Spirituality: Those who regularly attend religious services and engage in religious activities such as prayer reading religious material score are more likely to be grateful. Grateful people are more likely to acknowledge a belief in the interconnectedness of all life and a commitment to and responsibility to others (McCullough et. al., 2002).
- Materialism: Grateful individuals place less importance on material goods; they are less likely to judge their own and others success in terms of possessions accumulated; they are less envious of others; and are more likely to share their possessions with others relative to less grateful persons.

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