

November Wellness: Gratitude - Train Your Brain

By Ashley J. Sicilia

Soon, we'll be sitting at our family dinner tables waiting for our turn to tell everyone what we are thankful for. I practice gratitude all of the time (pats self on back). In fact, I have a daily reminder that goes off on my phone that asks me, "What are you grateful for today?" But, to be honest, I've been ignoring it lately. Hashtag — remind me later. November is a great time of the year to practice some well-needed mindfulness when it comes to being grateful.



"The intuitive understanding of the word 'gratitude' is associated with a thankful response to a gift or someone's positive action toward us." (Lambert, Graham and Fincham)

Did you know that taking 15 minutes every day to keep a gratitude journal may improve your health significantly? Researchers from University of California – Davis and the Mississippi University for Women theorize that practicing gratitude can increase your quality of life. Robert Emmons, a UC – Davis professor says, "...having a chronic medical condition puts one at risk for deteriorating mental health... Gratitude may serve as a buffer...". (Gratitude Is Good Medicine For Organ Recipients)

Researchers from these two facilities asked a group of organ recipients to keep a journal of what they were grateful for over the course of three weeks. A second group was asked to log their daily activities, among other things. The group that kept a gratitude journal scored higher when it came to mental and general health, compared to their counterparts! (Gratitude Is Good Medicine For Organ Recipients)

In other studies, however, where the amount of time was shorter, practicing gratitude failed to show any health benefits. Is practicing gratitude for a longer period of time, such as several months, the key? It's possible! But researchers don't yet know enough to say for certain. (Allen)

A study done by Jeff Huffman and colleagues showed that practicing gratitude may be good for the heart. They found that although practicing gratitude did not improve the likelihood of patients recovering from heart attacks being readmitted, it did improve their blood vessel function. (Allen) If changing the way you think, in turn, changes how your body heals, why wouldn't everyone do this, not only in times of sickness, but every day?!

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A study conducted at Indiana University by Dr. Joel Wong and Dr. Joshua Brown concluded that practicing gratitude may have long term health benefits on the brain. They reached out to 300 individuals seeking mental health counseling prior to the start of their treatment. The individuals first reported clinically low levels of mental health but after practicing gratitude, levels had increased! Three months later, a follow-up study found the individuals who wrote in their gratitude journals showed greater positive brain activity. This suggests that practicing gratitude trains the brain to be more sensitive to gratitude and that doing so may be beneficial to one's mental health in the long run. (Wong and Brown)

Essentially these theories suggest that you can train your brain to heal yourself, both mentally and physically. Of course, you should not replace any necessary medical treatment with gratitude alone, but rather know that while not the answer for every ailment, gratitude may just be what your body needs to live well.

Join Tycor for our monthly wellness challenge in practicing gratitude. Take 15 minutes out of your day, every day in November, and journal what you are grateful for. It just might set you up for an outstanding Thanksgiving, "I'm thankful for..." speech!

Sources

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