



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Why Appreciation & Charity Improve Our Health

“We can complain because rose bushes have thorns, or rejoice because thorn bushes have roses.” ~ Abraham Lincoln

One of the biggest influences on our emotional, mental, and physical health is our perspective, and one of the quickest and easiest ways to improve our perspective is to think about what we are grateful for in our lives. As attorneys, we are encouraged to engage in pro bono work, to give back or “pay it forward” through charitable acts, which can also improve our perspective. Ironically, it turns out that the combination of counting your blessings and giving back are powerful preventable care measures for your health. Several university studies (California, Connecticut, Ohio State, and Carnegie Mellon University) suggest that people experience many health benefits from consciously meditating on what they appreciate in life and when performing charitable acts. The bottom line? When we describe what we appreciate in our lives, such as in a gratitude journal, and when we reach out to others, such as being compassionate toward others or helping them, our body rewards us. People from these studies experienced:

- Reduction in chronic pain,
- Catching less colds,
- Having calmer nervous systems,
- Less anxiety and negative emotions that lead to stress related diseases,
- Increased immune function (specifically increased wound healing time),
- Reduction in risk of experiencing a second heart attack,
- Getting more and better sleep; and a
- More optimistic view of life.

Books such as *Why Good Things Happen to Good People* by Stephen Post, PhD, and Jill Neimark, and *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier* by Robert Emmons, PhD, detail not only the science and research behind the benefits but also the practices you can develop to reap them.

Try a short practice that will improve your physical and mental health. It is a simple, three day exercise.

Day One: This is easy. Your only mission, should you decide to accept it, is to be mindful and aware throughout your day of two things: 1) the people and circumstances that you

appreciate, and 2) the opportunities you have to being kind, compassionate, or helpful to others. Just notice these two things. You don't have to DO anything about them. Just notice something that you appreciate when you go to the grocery store, to court, to your office, when your friend calls and leaves you a message, etc. Notice a chance you had to be kind to another person, such as opening the door for the parent juggling three children and a grocery cart, or taking a moment to actually listen when you ask someone "how are you doing?" rather than rushing by. Sometimes the opportunities are much bigger. Maybe you have a chance to help out a colleague having a hard time with a case. Be aware of these opportunities.

Day Two: Now that you know how to focus on what you appreciate and opportunities to extend kindness to others, jot them down. Write them down in a list or a more detailed journal entry. You can write them down throughout the day or before you go to bed. But be sure to get them down on paper, or your tablet, or on your phone.

Day Three: This is the action phase. Today, when you notice something you appreciate, verbalize it. Did you appreciate how quickly the waiter or waitress brought your food? Tell them. Did you appreciate that your child packed their backpack or their own lunch for the day without you nagging them? Tell them. Did you appreciate the extra work your paralegal put into that case? Tell him or her. And, today, when you notice chances or opportunities for you to be kind to others and lend a helping hand, do it. Does that elderly gentlemen need help crossing the street? Help him. Does your spouse or neighbor need help bringing the groceries inside? Help him or her. Do you notice that the car next to you at the gas station doesn't have their gas cap back on? Tell the driver. Do your clients need a few extra minutes with you to feel better about their case? Spend it with them.

After this three day exercise, see how you feel. Has your general mood improved? Do you feel better about yourself and the world around you? Take a moment to consider an extra credit assignment: Did you put yourself on that list? Did you write down or acknowledge how much you appreciate your choices, thoughts, decisions and behaviors? Did you find ways to be kind and compassionate to yourself? Remember that the kindness, generosity, compassion, and caring we extend to others is only truly authentic and meaningful if we can extend those same gifts to ourselves. Mark Twain said, "Kindness is a language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see." Be grateful. Be kind. It will make you a much happier and healthier person.

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