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# GRATITUDE

## ANOTHER GATEWAY TO WELLNESS

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When we think of wellness, we oftentimes consider things like diet, exercise, work/life balance, connecting with those we care about, or cutting back on less healthy habits we may have. Many have also found great benefits from practices like yoga and meditation. But how many of us have ever considered incorporating a mindful practice of gratitude into our everyday living as a means of achieving a greater sense of wellness? If you have, you'd probably tell all those who would listen about its virtues. If you have not, this article may give you something new to consider adding to your wellness toolbox.

What is gratitude, anyway? Gratitude comes from the Latin root *gratia*, which can mean grace, graciousness or gratefulness depending on the context in which it is being used. One could think of it as thankful appreciation for that which brings us joy, security, a sense of

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purpose, or anything else that stirs positive emotions. Gratitude enables us to take active stock of the aspects of our life for which we are thankful or appreciative. Why practice gratitude? Research suggests that people who incorporate gratitude practices into their daily lives feel more optimistic, report being happier, have improved physical health, and experience improved personal relationships, both inside and outside the workplace.

According to research conducted by Dr. Robert A. Emmons of the University of California, Davis, and Dr. Michael E. McCullough of the University of Miami, there is an association between gratitude and wellness. This conclusion was drawn from their study in which they asked one group of subjects to write down things that they were grateful for each week. A second group was asked to catalog those things that happened during the week that had been irritating, annoying or otherwise unpleasant. This weekly practice was continued for a period of 10 weeks. At the end of that time, those who had focused on gratitude were more optimistic and felt better than those in the other group. Also, the “gratitude group,” reported exercising more and having fewer trips to the doctor than those in the “aggravation group.”

In another study led by Dr. Martin E.P. Seligman, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, subjects were asked to write, and personally deliver, a letter of gratitude to someone in their lives whom the subjects felt had never been adequately thanked for their kindness. Those who wrote and delivered the letter demonstrated a significant increase in happiness scores being tracked by Seligman.

Still other studies have looked at the impact gratitude can have on personal relationships. Whether it is simply thanking a spouse or loved one for their efforts, or acknowledging the good work done by a co-worker, those who engage in those practices report feeling more

positively toward the loved one or co-worker. Interestingly enough, those who engaged in the active expressions of gratitude were also more skillful at expressing concerns about their relationship when necessary.

In fairness, there are also studies that do not show a strong correlation between gratitude and improved wellness. Like all other forms of wellness practice, it is up to each of us to experiment, try things on, and see for ourselves what works and what does not.

Candidly, I have cycled between living inside and outside of gratitude over the years. No one is perfect, and it is unrealistic to think that we can access gratitude all of the time. But when I am incorporating gratitude practices into my daily life and interactions with others, there is no question that I feel more optimistic, more engaged and connected with others, find joy more easily, and just generally enjoy my passage through life more. During times of worry, challenge or adversity, I’ve found that it can be harder to identify those things for which I am grateful. But with patient focus, I am inevitably able to create a long list of things for which I am grateful, even on the most challenging days. For me, it just takes commitment to the practice. Gratitude helps me remember what I have, rather than what I lack. It diminishes my inclination to judge myself, and assess my worth, by comparing myself to others who may have “more” or may seem superior or more successful. I have found that cultivating a grateful heart is the single most important thing I do to remain balanced and grounded.

So, what might a gratitude practice look like? There are probably as many ways to cultivate gratitude as there are people willing to try it. Only you can find what best works for you. But here are some popular practices that you will find in literature on developing “an attitude of gratitude.”

- 1. Make a gratitude list or keep a gratitude journal.** There is something powerful about putting pen to paper. Find a quiet place and focus your mind on your blessings large and small. Don’t judge yourself for those things that make you grateful. If you love your car, write it down! Loved ones, upcoming trips, settling a case, winning a trial, closing a deal, dinner with a friend, watching a Colorado sunset, hiking in the mountains, good health, recovery from bad health - it doesn’t matter. If it’s important to you, it’s important to write
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it down. As your journal grows, you can return in times of challenge to those entries you made when you were feeling particularly grateful. This can serve as a good reminder that challenging times are temporary and will pass. When you're feeling uninspired, you can rewind to "better" times when the flow of life was easier and more enjoyable. This can jump-start your return to better wellness.

2. **If you appreciate someone, tell them.** Too often, we find ourselves stuck in our own heads, or concerned primarily about what is happening only in our own world. Our minds might race with thoughts such as: My job is really hard. My boss is aggravating. I'm out of work. The money never seems to stretch far enough. My teenagers are annoying me and causing me concern. My health at the moment is poor. I've experienced loss or grief. The list goes on. Expressing appreciation for others takes you out of yourself, and momentarily shifts your focus onto them. Focus on others seems to help us keep our own life situations in better perspective. And in our "high feedback" culture, we routinely hear about what could have been done better, and seemingly rarely are thanked for what has gone well. But gratitude is contagious. If you authentically practice it towards others, you will likely experience it coming back your way – and often at exactly the right time when you need it most.
  3. **Become an active observer of your thoughts.** Our minds are like busy highways. And sometimes our thoughts take us into bad neighborhoods. Don't believe every thought you have. Instead, try to become an unattached observer of your mind's activity. As negativity creeps in, as it always will in each of us, pause for a moment. Quietly note the thought as simply "thinking" rather than as a picture of objective reality. Challenge your belief in, or attachment to, the thought. Just note it. Don't try to judge or change it. The minute you have noted it, turn briefly to actively using your mind to think about something for which you are grateful, or that brings you joy. Leverage your mind as a tool, rather than as something that controls you.
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#### 4. Set aside time each day when you can rest in a quiet place and consider gratitude.

If you're as busy as most, and a still, quiet setting doesn't seem realistic, then do it in the shower, on your drive, while waiting in line, or while exercising. Just a few minutes will do the trick. Like exercise, meditation and yoga, a daily (or at least frequent) practice will be much more effective than trying to seek out gratitude only when you're feeling pressed, challenged or down. Practice it in good times and bad. The idea is that through consistent repetition, you will be literally training your brain and re-wiring your neurologic pathways. There is a great deal of science on this out there if you are interested. The concept is known as neuroplasticity. The metaphor is that the brain is "plastic" and can therefore be remolded and changed. The effects of a regular practice compound over time and can become a working part of your everyday life. Sporadic attention to gratitude is better than nothing, but the results probably won't be as striking.

If any of this resonates with you such that you'd like to learn more, there are many free resources available on the Internet. Type "gratitude practice" into your favorite search engine. You'll almost certainly find something that speaks to you. There are also books, podcasts, and even apps that you can buy to help get you started and guide you on your way. Finally, while a gratitude practice can benefit anyone, it is not a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always seek the advice of your medical doctor or other qualified health professional if you are experiencing difficulties beyond what seem manageable to you. ↪



*Thadd Paul has been a practicing attorney since 1993. After spending eight years in private practice, he moved in-house 2001 joining Nintendo of America Inc. in the Seattle area. Thadd has worked as in-house counsel for a number of Fortune 500 companies where he has focused on commercial transactions, technology, and intellectual property. Outside of work, Thadd enjoys a variety of active outdoor activities, aviation, and time with his family.*

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