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How Gratitude Can Improve Your Health and Wellbeing

Dr. Mercola. July 27 2016

Can feeling gratitude influence your health? According to a number of studies, the answer is yes. According to Dr. P. Murali Doraiswamy,¹ an expert in brain and mind health: "*If [thankfulness] were a drug, it would be the world's best-selling product with a health maintenance indication for every major organ system.*"

While the American once-a-year gratitude ritual of Thanksgiving is better than nothing, if you're serious about your wellbeing, you'd be wise to increase the frequency at which you feel and express gratitude.

People who are thankful for what they have are better able to cope with stress, have more positive emotions and less anxiety, sleep better,⁴ and have better heart health. Studies have also shown that gratitude can produce measurable effects on a number of systems in your body, including:

✓ Mood neurotransmitters (serotonin and norepinephrine)	✓ Inflammatory and immune systems (cytokines)
✓ Reproductive hormones (testosterone)	✓ Stress hormones (cortisol)
✓ Social bonding hormones (oxytocin)	✓ Blood pressure and cardiac and EEG rhythms
✓ Cognitive and pleasure related neurotransmitters (dopamine)	✓ Blood sugar

What Is Gratitude?

So what exactly is gratitude? According to Robert Emmons, one of the leading scientific experts on gratitude featured in the video above, gratitude has two key components:⁶

- It's "an affirmation of goodness;" when you feel gratitude, you affirm that you live in a benevolent world
- It's a recognition that the source of this goodness comes from outside of yourself; that other people (or higher powers, if you so like) have provided you with "gifts" that improve your life in some way

In Emmons' view, gratitude is "a relationship-strengthening emotion, because it requires us to see how we've been supported and affirmed by other people."

While there are as many reasons to be thankful as there are people in the world, one facet of life that many often forget to be thankful for (until it is too late) is their health. We tend to take our health for granted until we're suddenly in the throes of pain or debilitating illness.

It goes back to the old adage that it's really the little things that matter most, and if you cultivate gratitude for the little things, it will foster a more deep-seated sense of happiness.

How to Cultivate an Attitude of Gratitude

Like a muscle, your sense of gratitude can be strengthened with practice. One way to harness the positive power of gratitude is to keep a gratitude journal where you write down what you're grateful for each day. This can be done in a paper journal, or you can download a Gratitude Journal app from iTunes. In one study, people who kept a gratitude journal reported exercising more, and had fewer visits to the doctor compared to those who focused on sources of aggravation. As Dr. Alison Chen suggests in a recent Huffington Post article, creating a nightly gratitude ritual can be a powerful strategy.

Avoiding getting sucked into bad news is the other side of this equation. You may have to limit your media exposure from time to time if you find it difficult to maintain a positive outlook in the face of worldly horrors.

- **Nonverbal actions:** This includes smiles and hugs, both of which can express a wide array of messages, from encouragement and excitement to empathy and support.
- **Mind your please and thank-yous:** While it's easy to say words like please and thank you in passing, these courtesies can become potent acknowledgments of gratitude when combined with eye contact and sincerity.
- **Prayer and mindfulness meditation**
- **Tap forth gratitude:** The Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) is another helpful tool. EFT is a form of psychological acupressure based on the energy meridians used in acupuncture.