

Gratitude is a Feeling of Pleasure

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Abstract

Gratitude refers to a favorable emotion or attitude that arises in response to a recognized benefit. It is typically experienced when someone performs a kind act. This emotion is intricate and develops from both emotional and logical evaluations of our experiences. People may express gratitude towards various entities, including God, individuals, animals, and others. In the field of linguistics, expressing gratitude is viewed as a unique form of communication. Gratitude can manifest in different forms: it may be direct or indirect, ritualistic or emotional, intentional or unintentional, and it can be shown verbally or through nonverbal means. It encompasses feelings of joy, acknowledgment, and appreciation for the kindness and assistance received from others, fostering a more optimistic outlook, enhancing happiness, alleviating depression, and strengthening relationships. Practicing gratitude through methods like writing thank-you letters leads to the release of happiness-inducing hormones like dopamine and serotonin, which benefit mental well-being.

Keywords: Gratitude, Brain, Behavior, Understanding, Mental Health

Introduction

Gratitude allows space for sorrow and everything unfavorable [1]. It manages to yield positivity from both good and challenging situations. At first glance, it might appear to be merely an exercise in maintaining positivity, which may not hold much truth in the actual world. For some, the idea of “gratitude” can come across as dismissive of suffering. People often conceal the more painful aspects of their lives due to shame and embarrassment or because they have faced negative reactions from others when discussing their pain. A casual remark to “be grateful” can feel like adding to one’s suffering. The encouragement to be thankful may seem out of place, superficial, or even disrespectful and ineffective. Gratitude can be perceived as a pleasant sensation experienced when things are going well. It may be overly simplified into a routine listing of good experiences, and while noting the positives is a good starting point, the true potential of gratitude extends far beyond that. It can be relevant across all facets of real life. For gratitude to be meaningful in a life that is often intricate and challenging, it needs to possess the depth and resilience required. Upon closer examination, we realize that it indeed has that quality.

Understanding

To enhance our grasp of gratitude, relying on a single perspective is not sufficient [1]. Even within psychology, there are differing views. Some define gratitude as an emotion, others as a character strength, and still others see it as a conscious decision. It is reminiscent of the classic tale of six blind men encountering an elephant; one believes he is feeling a tree when touching the leg, another thinks he is holding a rope while grasping the tail, and a third claims it is a wall while leaning against the sturdy body, and so forth. Gratitude is perceived from various angles. Ultimately, “gratitude is the positive acknowledgment of received benefits,” and this acknowledgment arises from a combination of multiple abilities.

Gratitude acts as a combination of will, thought, and emotion, enhancing our wellbeing by helping us accept positive experiences. While many people recognize the concept of gratitude, assuming we fully understand it would be a mistake. It serves as a practical and all-encompassing resource that engages our entire being.

Gratitude includes emotions (what we feel), thoughts (how we think), and will (the choices we make). When these elements work together, they help us make sense of a world that can be unpredictable and change the connections in our brains to improve our wellbeing. Gratitude achieves this by repeatedly helping us acknowledge the good things in our lives.

Voice

At the core lies a fundamental experience filled with raw emotions (desire, awe, fear, hope, wonder, joy, and even horror) [2]. This is illustrated with three connected circles, representing the dynamic and flowing nature of our conscience. In the areas where the circles intersect, there is darkness symbolizing the depths of the unknown, the realm of mystery (the unknown self, the other-than-self). It is also in this space that we encounter the sacred, where our moral impulses shape our conscience's voices. From this core, the voices of conscience arise as instincts and gut feelings, which then appear as emotions like guilt, pride, gratitude, embarrassment, and shame. These voices address significant matters—craft, belonging, sacrifice/service, memory, imagination, and health. An “Other” voice represents any perspective that has not yet been acknowledged. These voices are shaped by social norms, influenced by personal experiences and cognitive growth. The voices develop and grow more profound as they guide our thoughts and emotions. As reflexive emotions become more varied and intricate, they still remain connected to the basic emotions.

Reflexive emotions such as gratitude, humility, regret, compassion, and disgust show a growing conscience. A mature conscience experiences these voices like a symphony, where they compete for recognition within a united expression, sometimes blending in harmony to represent exemplary moral behavior. This effort to achieve harmony among the voices reveals a sense of wholeness, where integrity resides. Within this symphony, we can observe role models, individuals who demonstrate wisdom, self-fulfillment, and emotional and spiritual awareness. However, in the midst of complex moral challenges, the voices of conscience can become disconnected, losing any sense of harmony. The challenge is to embrace this conflict as an invitation to explore deeper meanings, the unfamiliar, and the mysterious.

Brain

Research on gratitude examines the activity in the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) [1]. While it is not preferable to separate the functions of different brain regions due to their interconnectedness, simplifying the topic can sometimes aid in understanding. Within the mPFC, which plays a key role in gratitude, we can interpret our surroundings and assign significance to events and occurrences. This area helps us make sense of stimuli and allows us to interact positively with our experiences.

Our brains naturally rely on past events to guide us in new situations. Depending on the context, our brains may interpret a scenario as a desire, a threat, or something in between. For instance, a doctor's office might bring about feelings of relief or worry. Being in front of a stage could generate excitement or fear. A car entering the driveway can trigger joy or anxiety. These emotional responses are shaped by how the mPFC functions. Different perspectives on the same situation can alter not just our feelings but also our physical reactions. We can leverage this through the practice of gratitude. The transformation can occur on a small, immediate scale, but it can also lead to broader changes in mindset.

The anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) carries out various tasks, such as directing attention, scanning for threats, detecting errors, and seeking rewards. A small portion known as the pengual ACC (pgACC) is central to positive emotional experiences and is where gratitude is prominently represented. This overlap can be beneficial for us.

Even if someone's default emotional state does not lean towards positivity, gratitude can directly access that area of the brain.

It is crucial to emphasize: the brain is capable of change! It is flexible, and we shape it through practice and repetition. Practicing gratitude activates the pgACC, leading to the formation of neural connections that promote its continued use, thus enhancing a brain area that is closely tied to positive well-being and pleasant emotions. As gratitude strengthens in the pgACC, individuals can experience it as a lasting trait rather than a fleeting feeling. Sustained practice transforms gratitude from merely a momentary experience into a part of one's identity.

The ACC also plays a role in threat detection, scanning our surroundings for potential mistakes that might endanger us. To ensure our survival, we tend to focus more on identifying threats. This emphasis affects our thoughts, feelings, and physical reactions. Engaging in gratitude alters our brain's focus from being dominated by threats to incorporating a focus on benefits. This shift promotes positive emotions, a state of relaxation, and activates favorable neural pathways, ultimately influencing our overall well-being. As a result, we may experience reduced muscle tension and lower inflammation responses, with wide-ranging effects.

Behavior

It is believed that our actions and feelings come from processes in the nervous system [3]. Close experiences, such as our thoughts and emotions, are derived from tiny electrochemical reactions taking place between the neurons in our brain. Neurons send signals to one another through substances called neurotransmitters. There are various types of neurotransmitters, and their role in transferring signals between neurons has significant effects on our actions. It is crucial for these brain chemicals to be balanced; if they are not, it can lead to either excessive or insufficient activity

in certain areas of the brain. This imbalance can change our thoughts, feelings, and actions, potentially resulting in criminal behaviour.

Psychologists who study biological and chemical processes explain actions as a result of activity in the brain and the nervous system. The brain has various parts responsible for thinking that connect to share information and create overall responses. When it comes to communication, the areas responsible for speech work together with those handling thoughts and memories. If someone has a communication learning disability, they might struggle to understand what others say, which could lead to aggressive reactions, such as misinterpreting a joke as an insult. Additionally, behaviours can be significantly influenced by hormones like testosterone, which is known for increasing the tendency to take risks.

Moral Affect

Gratitude is seen as a moral feeling because it arises from and encourages behaviours driven by concern for others' well-being [4]. In contrast to other moral feelings that occur when someone fails to meet important standards (such as guilt and shame) or when someone wants to assist others (like sympathy and empathy), gratitude particularly arises when someone receives kind acts from others and promotes further kind actions among individuals.

There are three key moral roles of gratitude in social interactions, based on current research on gratitude and similar concepts like thankfulness and appreciation. First, gratitude acts as a moral indicator that reflects changes in social connections; those who receive help see their helpers as moral individuals who have positively affected their well-being and recognise the value of their relationships. Second, as a moral motivator, showing gratitude increases the likelihood that a benefactor will be kind again in the future, whereas expressing ingratitude might upset the benefactor and reduce their willingness to help. Finally, gratitude drives recipients to act kindly or refrain from harmful behaviour towards those who have helped them or others. The motivation to reciprocate gratitude is different from feelings of obligation or unfairness, as it is a positive emotion associated with happy mental states, similar to feelings of contentment, pride, and hope.

Integrity

The advisor's integrity showcases her unwavering commitment to a set of standards considered suitable by the person receiving advice [5]. It is important to recognize that this understanding of integrity can exist separately from kindness. For instance, an individual might expect an advisor to keep secrets regardless of whether they think the advisor is kind. On the other hand, one might doubt an advisor's ability to keep secrets, without considering their kindness.

Trust metrics often prioritize integrity. For instance, research examining the links between feelings, trust, and the acceptance of guidance employed a trust measure that

looked at whether the advisor would consistently uphold promises and tell the truth. The findings indicated that unrelated emotions experienced by the person seeking advice could influence this integrity-based trust, which in turn affected how much weight was given to the advisor's suggestions. More specifically, feelings of anger diminished integrity-based trust, while feelings of gratitude or happiness enhanced it.

Once integrity-based trust has been damaged due to a broken promise, it seems difficult to mend. After a person fails to fulfill a commitment, their reliability appears to be permanently affected, and simple apologies or new promises to change behavior do not significantly restore trust, even if these promises are sincerely kept.

Research

The empirical studies can be classified into three key areas: (1) ways to assess and understand gratitude; (2) profiles of individuals who often feel grateful; and (3) how gratitude has been utilized and can be implemented in society [4]. An increasing amount of research also intersects these themes by examining how gratitude is measured in young people, the positive effects it has on growth, and the various factors and strategies that help foster gratitude. Scholars looking to create effective uses of gratitude to enhance health and well-being should explore these research areas.

It seems justifiable to derive from the existing empirical findings that gratitude can genuinely be viewed as a moral feeling. We feel grateful when we recognize the selfless contributions of supportive individuals in achieving positive results in our lives. Showing appreciation to those who have been generous to us affirms their actions and encourages them to act kindly again in the future. Moreover, gratitude drives us to be kind not only to those who have helped us but to others as well. Consequently, individuals who frequently feel and express gratitude often strengthen their current relationships and build new, supportive ones. Essentially, as they become more aware of how others have supported them, they are more likely to reciprocate; and the more often this happens, the more effective the relationship networks are in enhancing mutual benefits for everyone involved.

Researchers have identified four distinct aspects of emotional experiences that set apart individuals who are more inclined to feel gratitude from those who are less inclined. In contrast to those with lower levels of gratitude, people with high gratitude tend to experience a deeper sense of appreciation for positive occurrences, and they feel grateful more often or with less difficulty during the day. They also recognize a broader range of advantages or life situations for which they express gratitude at any moment (such as for their families, jobs, friends, and health). Furthermore, they experience gratitude more intensely for each specific benefit, often directed towards multiple individuals.

Conclusion

Gratitude is commonly understood as a pleasant emotion felt after receiving assistance that we find meaningful. It represents a perspective that focuses on recognizing and valuing the good things in our lives. Studies indicate that practicing gratitude can lead to enhanced social connections, greater happiness, lower levels of depression, and improved overall well-being and health. Engaging in different gratitude practices contributes to better sleep quality, the release of hormones associated with happiness, management of stress hormone levels, decreased anxiety, and enhanced immune system performance. When we embrace gratitude, our brain produces neurotransmitters like dopamine and serotonin, which boost our mood and provide a sense of fulfillment and joy.

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