



e-quilibrium

- *“electronic briefs on behavior and health”*

Volume 1, Number 11
November 2005

Gratitude

Gratitude has been highly valued and encouraged in the world's major religions, and generally is assumed to be an asset in interpersonal relationships. Is there any personal health benefit of gratitude? The month in which we designate a day for “thanksgiving” seems an appropriate time to consider whether and how gratitude is related to health.

Gratitude is a feeling or sense of appreciation and thankfulness. It comes from the perception that one has benefited from the actions of another. Gratitude may be a temporary state, or an enduring trait. Results of studies of gratitude in the behavioral sciences have generally been what one would expect. Grateful people report more positive emotion, more satisfaction with life, more optimism, less depression, and less stress. Thankful persons tend to be less materialistic and more likely to emphasize spirituality in their lives. They also tend to be more giving. There is evidence suggesting that gratitude has positive effects on physical health, and may be associated with living longer.

Furthermore, it appears that persons can increase their gratitude, with important benefits. Keeping gratitude journals has positive effects on mood and altruistic behavior, and in one study persons keeping gratitude journals on a weekly basis were subsequently exercising more and reporting fewer physical symptoms. Psychologist Martin Seligman and his colleagues recently found that writing down three good things that happened each day (and why the good thing happened) for just one week was associated with increased happiness three months later.

There are barriers to gratitude... being narcissistic, feeling like a victim, failing to admit shortcomings, feeling entitled, overemphasizing material goods, and experiencing envy and resentment. Being grateful doesn't mean one ignores or denies problems, difficulties, and hardships in life, but involves recognition and appreciation of those things for which one can be thankful.

I've mentioned two strategies for increasing gratitude: 1) keeping a gratitude diary (i.e., journal of things for which one is thankful), and 2) each evening write down three good things that happened during that day, and why the good thing happened. A third possibility is to write a gratitude letter --- think of someone in your life (past or present) whom you've not properly thanked for the positive impact they have had in your life, and write that person a letter expressing your gratitude. Send the letter, or better yet, meet with that individual and read the letter to her/him in person. Gratitude expressed benefits both the giver and the receiver.

Gratitude is a noteworthy ingredient in a healthy life!

Paul J. Hershberger, Ph.D.

... is a clinical health psychologist. He is an Associate Professor of Family Medicine, and Director of Behavioral Science for the Dayton Community Family Practice Residency Program, Wright State University School of Medicine. His clinical practice includes psychotherapy, consultation, and coaching.

To subscribe to this e-newsletter, send an e-mail message to requests@somlist.wright.edu and put the following in the subject line: subscribe som_e-equilibrium

If you do not wish to receive this e-newsletter, send an e-mail message to requests@somlist.wright.edu and put the following in the subject line: unsubscribe som_e-equilibrium

If you wish to read previous newsletters, you may find them at: www.daytonfamilymedicine.org/html/equilibrium

To contact Dr. Hershberger:
e-mail: paul.hershberger@wright.edu
phone: (937) 278-6251, ext 2021