Practicing gratitude

Do you remember the last time you felt grateful for one of life's small pleasures? For example: a day of sunshine after weeks of rain; a perfectly ripe tomato from a local garden; a thoughtful comment from a colleague. These little gifts happen daily, but how often do we pause and feel grateful for them?



Complaining is easy, problems appear crystal clear, unwanted, and definitive: a cold in the summer, too many unanswered emails, not enough free time, weeks of rain, a difficult coworker - we can always find something that isn't right or ideal. Noticing the things in our lives that are going right is not as easy because good things don't shout and beg attention in quite the same way as the things we deem bad or negative. Good things can more easily go unnoticed or unrecognized in our busy problem-solving lives.

However, research shows that practicing **gratitude** has many positive effects on mental and physical health and overall well-being. In a recent study at the University of California, three groups of people were asked to make weekly logs of their experiences: one group focused on tracking negative things in their week, another on what they were grateful for or positive things, and a third was simply asked to make a note of something that affected them, without emphasizing whether it was good or bad. At the ten week mark, the people who recorded what they were grateful for were generally more optimistic they even exercised more and had fewer trips to the doctor.

Many such studies have been conducted on the effects of expressing gratitude. People who regularly express gratitude experience fewer symptoms of pain and take better care of their overall health. They are also happier and have less intrusive negative emotions such as envy, resentment, and regret. That's not all, here are some more of the amazing benefits of gratitude:

- Improves sleep
- Positively affects self-esteem and self-worth
- Increases resilience
- Boosts the immune system
- Boosts our careers
- Strengthens our emotions
- Makes us more optimistic

So now that we have covered the ways gratitude has an amazing impact on many facets of our lives, how do we implement it? It is not easy to make the switch from focusing on negatives to emphasizing positives, especially when we live in a culture that endorses near constant complaining.

One tried and true way to increase your daily dose of gratitude is to **keep a gratitude journal.** This means that each day you record five things you are grateful for (doing it right when you wake up or before sleep tends to make it easier to stick to). Some things of course will repeat, big ones like having a roof over your head, a loving family, or a career you care about. Others might be smaller and only occur that day, like when a friend cooks you a good meal, or that you caught the bus just as it was pulling up. Big or small, paying attention to the little gifts that fall upon us every day will increase your awareness of them and you will begin to feel more grateful overall and reap the many benefits of saying thanks.

You can also **express gratitude aloud**. This means doing things like telling people what you appreciate about them and sharing positive stories and feelings from your day. It also means that when you feel the urge to complain or criticize make an effort to find something you are happy about to voice in its place.

Of course, this does not imply that you must put an end to telling people when something is wrong - it can be extremely beneficial to have the compassionate ear of a friend when times get tough. However, if you can eliminate some of your daily complaining and turn up the dial on gratitude, you are sure to bring more positivity and good health into your life and the lives of those around you.