

The Interface



GRATITUDE AND WELL BEING: The Benefits of Appreciation

by Randy A. Sansone, MD, and Lori A. Sansone, MD

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This ongoing column is dedicated to the challenging clinical interface between psychiatry and primary care—two fields that are inexorably linked.

ABSTRACT

The word “gratitude” has a number of different meanings, depending on the context. However, a practical clinical definition is as follows—*gratitude* is the appreciation of what is valuable and meaningful to oneself; it is a general state of thankfulness and/or appreciation. The majority of empirical studies indicate that there

is an association between gratitude and a sense of overall well being. However, there are several studies that indicate potential nuances in the relationship between gratitude and well being as well as studies with negative findings. In terms of assessing gratitude, numerous assessment measures are available. From a clinical perspective, there are suggested therapeutic exercises and

techniques to enhance gratitude, and they appear relatively simple and easy to integrate into psychotherapy practice. However, the therapeutic efficacy of these techniques remains largely unknown. Only future research will clarify the many questions around assessment, potential benefits, and enhancement of gratitude.

KEY WORDS

Gratitude, well being, psychotherapy, psychotherapy techniques

INTRODUCTION

In this edition of *The Interface*, we discuss the subject of gratitude. While retaining slightly different meanings depending on the context, *gratitude* may be broadly defined as the appreciation of what is valuable and meaningful to oneself. The majority of available research studies indicate that gratitude is associated with an enhanced sense of personal well being. We review several of these studies, highlight some nuances related to the current research on gratitude, provide an overview of assessment approaches to gratitude, and suggest several simple techniques for enhancing the experience of gratitude in patients in the psychotherapy setting.

A DEFINITION OF GRATITUDE

Like most words, gratitude appears to have a number of different meanings, depending on the context. For example, gratitude has been conceptualized as a moral virtue, an attitude, an emotion, a habit, a personality trait, and a coping response.¹ A number of researchers have defined *gratitude* as a positive emotional reaction in response to the receipt of a gift or benefit from someone.² Gratitude has also been conceptualized both as a state phenomenon (i.e., an emotional

reaction to a present event or experience) as well as a dispositional characteristic or trait phenomenon.² For our purposes, we would like to define gratitude in a much broader sense. *Gratitude* is the appreciation of what is valuable and meaningful to oneself and represents a general state of thankfulness and/or appreciation. This proposed definition transcends the interpersonal overtones attributed to the term (i.e., the construct of receiving something from someone) and allows for a more inclusive meaning (e.g., being thankful for experiences, such as being alive and coming into contact with nature). This definition also allows for both state and trait contexts.

ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN GRATITUDE AND WELL BEING

A number of authors have espoused a theoretical relationship between gratitude and well being.³⁻⁶ In a very pragmatic way, this association seems logical. Experiencing gratitude, thankfulness, and appreciation tends to foster positive feelings, which in turn, contribute to one's overall sense of well being. Therefore, gratitude appears to be one component, among many components, that contributes to an individual's well being. However, in addition to theoretical postulation, there are a number of empirical endeavors that support this association—all from the first decade of this century.

Empirical evidence of a gratitude/well being connection. Emmons and McCullough examined gratitude and well being under three experimental conditions.⁷ Participants were divided into three groups (i.e., one group was asked to journal about negative events or hassles, a second group about the things for which they were grateful, and a third group about neutral life events) and were

required to journal either daily or weekly. Across the various study conditions, the gratitude subsample consistently evidenced higher well being in comparison with the other two study groups.

Dickerhoof⁸ designed an experiment in which students could participate in one of two exercises—one that purportedly would boost happiness or another that consisted of “cognitive exercises.” To equalize the expectations of participants, the students were informed that participation in either group was likely to increase their overall sense of well being. The “happiness” paradigm required participants to either write about their best possible future selves (optimism exercise) or write letters of gratitude (gratitude exercise). In contrast, in the control paradigm, participants were required to write about the events of the past week. As predicted, compared with the control group, the happiness-paradigm group demonstrated increases in well being.

Froh et al⁹ conducted a study in which 221 adolescents were assigned to either a gratitude exercise (i.e., counting one's blessings), a hassles condition, or a control condition. As predicted, the gratitude condition was associated with greater life satisfaction. The authors concluded from their experience that counting blessings seems to be an effective intervention for enhancing well being in adolescents.

In a sample of 389 adults, Wood et al¹⁰ examined gratitude and well being in the context of personality style. In this study, gratitude was most strongly correlated with personality attributes related to well being, and the researchers concluded that gratitude has a unique relationship with life satisfaction.

Like the preceding authors, other studies have found similar findings. For example, among Taiwanese high

school athletes, Chen and Kee¹¹ found that gratitude positively predicted life satisfaction. Tseng¹² found an association between gratitude and well being among 270 Taiwanese college students. Finally, Froh et al¹³ examined 154 adolescents and confirmed associations between gratitude and life satisfaction.

Facets of the gratitude/well being relationship. In addition to the general association between gratitude and well being, a number of investigators have examined particular facets of this relationship. For example, Wood et al¹⁴ found that coping styles did not seem to influence or mediate this relationship.¹⁴ Verduyn et al¹⁵ found that state, or current, gratitude could be enhanced by the importance of the stimulus, by the intensity of the emotion at onset, and through the physical or mental reappearance of the eliciting stimulus. Wood et al¹⁶ determined that higher levels of gratitude predicted better subjective sleep quality and sleep duration. Gysels et al¹⁷ found that, among cancer patients, gratitude was one of the motivations to participate in a research study related to palliative care. Froh et al¹⁸ determined that participants with lower levels of positive feelings, in contrast to those with higher levels of positive feelings, were more likely to experience gratitude in a gratitude intervention. Finally, Polak and McCullough¹⁹ found that gratitude may have the potential to reduce the negative effects of materialistic strivings. In summary, these findings indicate that the gratitude/well being association has a number of adjunctive aspects that warrant further study, particularly with regard to ways to enhance the experience of gratitude in the clinical setting.

Conflicting empirical data. As expected, not all investigators have confirmed associations between

TABLE 1. The Gratitude Questionnaire-Six Item Form (GQ-6)

Using the scale below as a guide, write a number beside each statement to indicate how much you agree with it.

1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=slightly disagree, 4=neutral, 5=slightly agree, 6=agree, 7=strongly agree

___ 1. I have so much in life for which to be thankful.

___ 2. If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list.

___ 3. When I look at the world, I don't see much for which to be grateful.*

___ 4. I am grateful to a wide variety of people.

___ 5. As I get older I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events, and situations that have been part of my life history.

___ 6. Long amounts of time can go by before I feel grateful to something or someone.*

*reverse scored items

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Scoring Instructions:

1. Add up your scores for items 1, 2, 4, and 5.
2. Reverse your scores for items 3 and 6. That is, if you scored a "7," give yourself a "1," if you scored a "6," give yourself a "2," etc.
3. Add the reversed scores for items 3 and 6 to the total from Step 1. This is your total GQ-6 score. This number should be between 6 and 42.

Interpretation:

- 25th Percentile: a score below 35 (bottom quartile)
- 50th Percentile: a score below 38 (bottom half)
- 75th Percentile: a score of 41 (higher than 75%)
- Top 13%: a score of 42

TABLE 2. Psychological strategies that may enhance feelings of gratitude

- Journaling about things for which to be grateful
- Thinking about someone for whom you are grateful
- Writing/sending a letter to someone for whom you are grateful
- Meditating on gratitude (present moment awareness)
- Undertaking the "Count Your Blessings" exercise (at the end of the week, writing down three things for which you were grateful)
- Practicing saying "thank you" in a sincere and meaningful way
- Writing thank you notes
- If religious, praying about your gratitude

gratitude and well being. For example, Kashdan et al²⁰ examined veterans with and without posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).²⁰ Among the participants with PTSD, trait gratitude did demonstrate a relationship with well being, but not among nontraumatized veterans. Likewise, in college students, Gurel Kirgiz²¹ compared a gratitude condition (i.e., composing a letter to someone who made a positive difference in the life of the participant) with a neutral emotional condition, but present levels of gratitude did not evidence a relationship with well being. (In this study, trait gratitude did evidence an association with well being.) Among divorced middle-aged women, Henrie²² compared those who journaled gratitude experiences with those who read educational materials and those on a wait-list group; the treatment groups showed no improvement in their satisfaction with life. Finally, Mallen Ozimkowski²³ examined the effect of a "gratitude visit" (i.e., the writing and delivering of a letter of gratitude to someone in their lives who was never properly thanked) in children and adolescents. In this study, the gratitude exercise was not associated with enhanced well being. These findings suggest that there are conditions or circumstances that temper the association between gratitude and well being, which warrant further investigation if gratitude exercises are to be undertaken and be consistently effective in the clinical setting.

ASSESSMENT MEASURES FOR GRATITUDE

For interested readers, Emmons et al²⁴ have summarized the available assessment measures for gratitude. In addition, we were able to locate two questionnaires in the empirical literature, the Gratitude

Questionnaire-Six-Item Form (GQ-6) and the Gratitude Resentment and Appreciation Test (GRAT).

Gratitude Questionnaire-Six Item Form. The GQ-6 is a brief, six-item, self-report measure that assesses one's disposition to experience gratitude (Table 1).²⁵ With Likert-style response options (1 =strongly disagree and 7=strongly agree), the GQ-6 is positively related to optimism, life satisfaction, hope, spirituality/religiousness, forgiveness, empathy, and prosocial behavior, and negatively related to depression, anxiety, materialism, and envy. Two items are reverse scored to inhibit response bias. The GQ-6 has reportedly good internal reliability.

Gratitude Resentment and Appreciation Test. There are three versions of the GRAT. The original GRAT consists of 44 items that contain the following three factors: abundance, simple appreciation, and appreciation of others.²⁶ There is also a Revised GRAT consisting of 16 items with Likert-style response options as well as a nine-item GRAT Short Form. This measure has shown good reliability, validity, and internal consistency.

CLINICAL EXERCISES THAT MAY REINFORCE GRATITUDE

According to Bono and McCullough,²⁷ gratitude can be enhanced experimentally through relatively simple psychological interventions, which suggests that uncomplicated interventions may be reasonably effective in the clinical setting (Table 2).²⁷ While few of the techniques listed in Table 1 have much empirical substantiation, the field of gratitude is in its infancy and validated techniques for clinical use may soon be available.

CONCLUSIONS

Gratitude may be broadly defined as the appreciation of what is

valuable and meaningful to oneself. It represents a general state of thankfulness and/or appreciation. An existing body of research supports an association between gratitude and an overall sense of well being, although occasional negative findings are also evident in the literature. Research also indicates that there are a number of potential nuances in the relationship between gratitude and well being that may eventually be relevant to the effective integration of gratitude techniques into psychotherapy treatment. A number of measures exist for the assessment of gratitude and we have presented two examples. According to some authorities, the available techniques for enhancing gratitude and, therefore, well being are relatively simple and easy to integrate into psychotherapy practice, although the characteristics of these techniques in terms of efficacy and sustained change remain largely unknown. Only future research will clarify the many questions around assessing and enhancing gratitude.

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AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS: Dr. R. Sansone is a professor in the Departments of Psychiatry and Internal Medicine at Wright State University School of Medicine in Dayton, Ohio, and Director of Psychiatry Education at Kettering Medical Center in Kettering, Ohio; Dr. L. Sansone is a family medicine physician (government service) and Medical Director of the Family Health Clinic at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, WPAFB, in Dayton, Ohio. The views and opinions expressed in this column are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or the position of the United States Air Force, Department of Defense, or US government.

ADDRESS CORRESPONDENCE TO:

Randy A. Sansone, MD, Sycamore Primary Care Center, 2115 Leiter Road, Miamisburg, OH 45342; Phone: (937) 384-6850; Fax: (937) 384-6938; E-mail: Randy.sansone@khnetwork.org. ●