



The Importance of Gratitude

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I was having a terrible moment. It seemed that life's slings and arrows hit me all at once and every corner of my existence felt stuck and unmanageable. Then, a good friend came to the rescue. "Quick!" she said. "Think of three things that you're grateful for. It will shift your attitude." So, I sat up, took a breath and remembered how great that cup of coffee at breakfast had tasted, how much I love my apartment and how exquisite the sun had felt on my face that morning after days of rain. Thinking of these things helped me soften inside and once I had located these three things, I suddenly saw things to be grateful for everywhere around me. My friend was right. I felt different, better and able to move with my life rather than being in a place of stuckness and resistance. **I thought of one of my favorite quotes from Winston Churchill: "Any fool can see what's wrong, can you see what's right?"**

The dictionary defines gratitude as "the quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness." It follows that when you choose to be grateful (and you can always choose) you become more able to bend and flow with life. Solutions are easier to find; connections are easier to be made and maintained. You just plain feel better.

There is actually a biological reason for this. The hypothalamus is the part of our brain that regulates many body functions including appetite, sleep and metabolism. A study done in 2009 by the National Institute of Health found that this part of the brain is actually activated when we feel gratitude or display acts of kindness. What's more, gratitude and kindness flood our brains with the chemical dopamine, the very substance that also appears in our systems when we eat chocolate or are in love. Gratitude and kindness thus create a chemical reality in our systems that feels so good, we want to feel good some more. Which creates a happy cycle of being for us and for those around us.

Cultivating a practice of gratitude acts as a powerful catalyst for our overall wellbeing. As mentioned above, sleep is regulated by the hypothalamus and therefore gratitude can affect the quality of sleep. It seems incredible but being thankful can help induce deep and healthy sleep. But it's true and given how powerful sleep is for one's overall health there is then the cascade of benefits: reduced anxiety, relief from depression and a boost to the immune system.

Given the verifiable health benefits of gratitude, it is no surprise then that people who practice gratitude report their lives to be full of greater vitality and strength.

Even in extreme moments, gratitude can offer benefits. Scientific studies have shown that trauma patients who practice gratitude were more resilient and made faster recoveries than patients who did not practice such thinking.

Writer Lee Woodruff offers a wonderful example of how shifting to a place of gratitude can change things. In 2006, her husband, the ABC correspondent Bob Woodruff sustained a life-threatening brain injury while on assignment covering the war in Iraq. It was unclear for a long time what kind of life Bob would have after this terrible trauma. To comfort Lee, a friend gave her a set of worry beads and at night she would touch bead after bead, assigning each one a worry, as she let herself drift off to sleep. But at a certain point she made a shift: she renamed them Gratitude Beads and now when she is stressed, she touches each one and names something she is grateful for. The shift changed everything for her. It brought her energy up and forward into the land of hope and faith. And happily, Bob Woodruff has made a complete recovery.

Offer yourself a simple experience of gratitude right now. What three things are you grateful for? You don't have to think of huge things, even the small things in life offer beauty, inspiration and relief and are worth appreciating. Write them down and then revisit the list several times today. Notice how you feel. Notice how you sleep. And then wake up and do it again tomorrow.

