The Therapeutic Value of Experiencing and Expressing Gratitude

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Therapeutic Value of Experiencing and Expressing Gratitude

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Gratitude has recently received a significant amount of research attention in the emerging field of positive psychology. Gratitude interventions are being empirically validated and are showing great promise in enhancing life satisfaction, decreasing depression and anxiety, coping with adversity, facilitating relationships, building civic and moral aspirations and behaviors, and promoting physiological benefits as well. This article will tie the empirical literature to an LDS theology that has long taught and currently advocates for the cultivation of gratitude as an essential component of a spiritually based, meaningful, and happy life. An empirical overview of the benefits of gratitude will be provided, potential gratitude interventions will be suggested, and principles for intervention effectiveness will be discussed.

Louisa Mellor Clark was the oldest living child of James and Mary Ann Mellor who crossed the plains in the Martin handcart company. Louisa was 16 at the time of the handcart trek. She recorded the following incident in her journal:

The first snowstorm left about two feet of snow on the ground, and we began to feel very nervous. We had to wade through more streams, and sometimes up to our waists, and when we got through our clothes would freeze on us until a great many gave up and many died, mostly old people. At last the snow got to be four and five feet deep and often we had to shovel a road before we could move. Thus our traveling was very slow and our provisions nearly gave out.

My mother, still being weak, finally gave up and said she could go no further. The company could not wait for her, so she bade my father goodbye and kissed each one of the children Godspeed. Then my mother sat down on a boulder and wept. I told my sister, Elizabeth, to take good care of the twins and the rest of the family, and that I would stay with mother. I went a few yards away and prayed with faith that God would help us, that He would protect us from devouring wolves, and asked that He would let us reach camp. As I was going back to where my mother was sitting I found a pie in the road. I picked it up and gave it to mother to eat. After resting awhile we started on our journey, thanking God for the blessings. A few miles before we reached camp we met my father coming out to meet us. We arrived in camp at 10:00 p.m. Many times after that mother felt like giving up and quitting, but then would remember how wonderful the Lord had been to spare her vaughn e. worthen, phd, is a clinical professor of counseling psychology at brigham young university in provo, utah. richard l. isakson, phd, is a clinical professor of counseling psychology at brigham young university in provo, utah. both work in the counseling and career center on the byu campus. correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to vaughn e. worthen, phd, counseling and career center, brigham young university, 2539 wsc, provo, ut. e-mail: vaughn_worthen@byu.edu
so many times, and offered a prayer of gratitude instead. So she went on her way rejoicing while walking the blood-stained path of snow [italics added] (Carter, 1975, p. 305).

Mary Ann Mellor’s life-altering manifestations of gratitude were not simply based on finding a sustaining “pie,” but on the more complete recognition that God cared about her and her family, as evidenced by His intervention. Recognizing the hand of God in life leads to a deep sense of God’s grace. Thus, for religiously oriented individuals, gratitude may also be an expression of faith in God.

Gratitude can have a profound effect on perspective. As one author asserts, “It seems obvious that gratitude is prominently involved, indeed vital, for living a good life” (Shelton, 2004, p. 265). When individuals feel discouraged, anxious, or depressed, a grateful outlook helps to balance perspective and brings to remembrance that even in challenging times life offers many gifts. Shifting attention from problems to blessings activates more effective problem solving efforts. Gratitude is more likely to promote endurance and thriving in times of adversity. Gratitude operates in times of abundance, leading to satisfying and happy lives while helping retain humility. The purpose of this article is to explain the therapeutic value of gratitude and to suggest principles and potential interventions to cultivate it.

Gratitude has been extolled as a virtue in nearly every culture throughout time. It is a universally desired virtue at personal, interpersonal, organizational and community levels. In a sample of older adults, gratitude was found to be the third most common discrete positive affect, experienced by 90% of the sample (Chipperfield, Perry, & Weiner, 2003). It is a core element of many religious orientations and is central to Christianity. It is related to feelings of contentment (Walker & Pitts, 1998), hope (Overwalle, Mervielde, & De Schuyter, 1995), joy (Schimmack & Reisizen, 1997) and happiness (Overwalle et al., 1995). Gratitude’s antitheses are hate, jealousy, contempt (Schimmack & Reisizen, 1997) and resentment (Roberts, 2004).

**WHAT IS GRATITUDE?**

Gratitude is a positive emotion and has also been identified as a personal strength or character virtue (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It is receiving significant research attention in the emerging field of positive psychology. In one study (Gallup, 1998), 67% of adults said that they expressed gratitude to others “all the time.” In the same study, 54% said that they expressed gratitude to God “all the time.”

Gratitude is a positive experience and comes from recognizing gifts or blessings and feeling thankful. Gratitude is also an attitude, a way of perceiving life, where individuals are attuned to the beneficial actions of others on their behalf. This attitude might be characterized as situational or chronic. Those exhibiting chronic gratitude are said to possess a grateful disposition. Gratitude is also a habit that can be cultivated. Grateful thinking develops a disposition or tendency to focus on the blessings of life. Gratitude is also a coping response to challenging and difficult circumstances. Thus, on closer inspection, gratitude has emotional, attitudinal, characterological, and situational components.

**LDS PERSPECTIVE**

LDS leaders have recognized and continually taught the importance of gratitude. Gratitude has been called a “spiritual attribute” (Hunter, 1997) and a “divine principle” (Hinckley, 1997). It has been described as one of the foundational virtues of “true character” (Benson, 1988). President Thomas S. Monson (2000) spoke of the power of gratitude when he stated, “We can lift ourselves, and others as well, when we refuse to remain in the realm of negative thought and cultivate within our hearts an attitude of gratitude” (p. 2). President Joseph F. Smith (1939) explained the benefits of gratitude, stating that “the spirit of gratitude is always pleasant and satisfying because it carries with it a sense of helpfulness to others; it begets love and friendship, and engenders divine influence. Gratitude is said to be the memory of the heart” (p. 262). Adding to this, Elder Robert D. Hales (1992) suggested, “In some quiet way, the expression and feelings of gratitude have a wonderful cleansing or healing nature... Gratitude brings a peace that helps us overcome the pain of adversity and failure” (p. 63).

Gratitude is identified as one of 17 values advocated in For the Strength of Youth (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001). President Hinckley (1997) has counseled us to “cultivate a spirit of thanksgiving for the blessings of life and for the marvelous gifts and privileges you enjoy” (p. 246). Finally, George Q.
Cannon (1867/1974) articulated one of the key reasons why gratitude is such a powerful force for good when he stated, “When our hearts are filled with thanksgiving, gratitude, and praise to God, we are in a fit condition to receive additional blessings, and to have more of the outpouring of His Holy Spirit” (p. 330). When individuals experience and express gratitude, they open the doors to divine influence and the companionship of the Holy Spirit, for their own benefit and for the well-being of others.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

Psychological and philosophical definitions of gratitude include the following: “the willingness to recognize the unearned increments of value in one’s experience” (Bertocci & Millard, 1963, p. 389) and “an estimate of gain coupled with the judgment that someone else is responsible for that gain” (Solomon, 1977, p. 316). Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough (2003, 2004) suggest four elements in their definition: (1) the capacity to perceive that an intentional gift or blessing has been received, or at least that someone (mortal or divine) attempted to give a gift, even if not received or experienced by the intended recipient, (2) no expectation that the gift/blessing is earned or deserved, (3) recognition of the effort of the giver, sometimes at high cost to themselves, and (4) no expectation of reciprocity. Gratitude can be distinguished from “indebtedness,” which generally feels less positive or even negative, carries with it a sense of obligation, and is embedded in reciprocity. Gratitude is absent feelings of manipulation, but indebtedness could feel demanding and may even be experienced as manipulative.

In making a case for gratitude as a positive response to life, the premise of this article is based on the belief that individuals have the capacity to choose their attitudes toward people and situations. Experiencing and expressing gratitude or any positive response to life’s circumstances is dependent on the ability to choose one’s attitude. George Kelly (1955), the creator of Personal Construct Theory, based his theory in the tenets of “constructive alternativism,” stating, “There are always some alternative constructions available to choose among in dealing with the world. No one needs to paint himself into a corner; no one needs to be completely hemmed in by circumstances; no one needs to be the victim of his biography” (p. 15). Viktor Frankl (1963) articulated this same idea when he stated, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way” (p. 104). Frankl (1973) also indicated that with this freedom “men can give meaning to their lives by...experiencing the Good, the True, and the Beautiful” (p. xiii). Gratitude is one of those “Goods,” and as a response to life, it is only possible if it is an option clients can choose. We argue that it is, and that it can be cultivated. The following benefits are available to those who adopt a grateful approach to life.

THE EFFECTS OF GRATITUDE

Feeling and expressing gratitude provide a variety of benefits. Recently, several studies have been devised to test whether interventions to promote gratitude can increase positive affect, reduce negative affect, and lead to other helpful positive outcomes. These studies have demonstrated promising results (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Lyubomirsky, Tkach, & Sheldon, 2004; McCraty & Childre, 2004; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). The effects of gratitude are highlighted in six domains of life: enhancing happiness and life satisfaction; mental health benefits; coping with adversity; interpersonal benefits; moral, civic, and spiritual benefits; and physical benefits (see Table 1).

Although gratitude has many beneficial outcomes, some of these may be time-limited and situation bound, without necessarily leading to lasting changes or permanent increases in levels of life satisfaction. Temporary effects are more likely to occur when individuals only periodically experience gratitude. Other factors can negate the effects of gratitude: diminished capacity for empathy, self-absorption, becoming overwhelmed by circumstances, getting stuck in chronic misery, resentment, sense of entitlement, becoming too materialistic, taking too much credit for successes or failures, living life without being fully engaged, living pressure-filled and fast-paced lives, comparisons with others, and anything that reduces appreciation and recognition of the benefits and blessings that come unearned and from the goodwill of others.
Table 1
Positive Effects of Experiencing and Expressing Gratitude

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Finding</th>
<th>Source</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enhanced Life Satisfaction</td>
<td>Expressing gratitude helped 90% of adults/teens feel &quot;somewhat/extremely&quot; happy.</td>
<td>Gallup, 1998</td>
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<td>Writing and thinking about experiences of gratitude helps people feel happier and more</td>
<td>Emmons &amp; Crumpler, 2000;</td>
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<td>Grateful disposition correlated with positive emotionality, vitality, happiness, life</td>
<td>Adler &amp; Fagley, 2005; McCallough, Emmons, &amp; Tsang, 2002</td>
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<td></td>
<td>satisfaction, hope, and optimism.</td>
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<td>Counting blessings led to increased life satisfaction, well-being, positive affect,</td>
<td>Emmons &amp; McCullough, 2003; Lyubomirsky, Tkach, &amp; Sheldon, 2004</td>
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<td>optimism and reductions in negative affect as well as making more progress on personal</td>
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<td>goals.</td>
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<td>Gratitude was one of 5 out of 24 character strengths that was strongly and consistently</td>
<td>Park, Peterson, &amp; Seligman, 2004</td>
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<td>associated with life satisfaction.</td>
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<td>Gratitude increases access to positive memories.</td>
<td>Watkins, Van Gelder, &amp; Maleki, 2006</td>
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<td>Gratitude may forestall the effects of adaptation to positive events (sustaining</td>
<td>Sheldon &amp; Lyubomirsky, 2004</td>
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<td>happiness longer).</td>
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<td>Mental Health Benefits</td>
<td>Grateful disposition correlated negatively with depression and anxiety.</td>
<td>McCullough et al., 2002; Woodward, Moua, &amp; Watkins, 1998</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Gratitude interventions led to decreases in depression and negative affect.</td>
<td>Seligman et al., 2005; Seligman et al., 2006; Sheldon &amp; Lyubomirsky, 2006</td>
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<td>Thankfulness was associated with reduced risks for major depression, phobias,</td>
<td>Kendler et al., 2003</td>
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<td>generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and bulimia nervosa, nicotine dependence,</td>
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<td>alcohol dependence, drug abuse or dependence, and adult antisocial behavior.</td>
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<td>Trait gratitude negatively correlated with resentment about the past.</td>
<td>Watkins, Woodward, Seone, &amp; Kolts, 2003</td>
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<td>Coping with Adversity</td>
<td>Gratitude was the second most frequently felt emotion after 2001 terrorist attack.</td>
<td>Frederickson, Tugade, Waugh, &amp; Larkin, 2003</td>
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<td>Hurricane Andrew survivors often experienced gratitude in the face of loss.</td>
<td>Coffman, 1996</td>
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<td>Trauma survivors with PTSD who experienced more gratitude had significantly lower levels of PTSD symptoms.</td>
<td>Massingale et al., 2001</td>
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<td>Vietnam vets diagnosed with PTSD who had greater dispositional gratitude experienced</td>
<td>Kaushan, Uswatte, &amp; Julian, 2006</td>
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<td>greater daily well being.</td>
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<td>A grateful approach to negative life events helps reframe memories of unpleasant events.</td>
<td>Watkins, Grimm, &amp; Hailu, 1999</td>
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<td>Therapeutic Gratitude</td>
<td>Gratitude interventions led to increased interpersonal connectedness.</td>
<td>Emmons &amp; McCullough, 2003; McCullough et al., 2002</td>
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<td>Interpersonal Benefits</td>
<td>Those who tend to experience gratitude more frequently reported being more forgiving.</td>
<td>McCullough et al., 2002</td>
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<td>Those rated as having more grateful disposition were viewed as more empathic and supportive of others.</td>
<td>McCullough et al., 2002</td>
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<td>Grateful people reported being less envious of others and more generous with their possessions.</td>
<td>McCullough et al., 2002</td>
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<td>Those in the gratitude interventions reported helping someone more frequently.</td>
<td>Emmons &amp; McCullough, 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moral, Civic, and Spiritual Benefits</td>
<td>Religiously inclined people experience gratitude more frequently than others.</td>
<td>McCullough, Tsang, &amp; Emmons, 2004</td>
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<td>Those thanked for helping are much more likely to help another in the near future.</td>
<td>Clark, 1975; Goldman, Seever, &amp; Seever, 1982; Moss &amp; Page, 1972</td>
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<td>Grateful people reported being less materialistic and less oriented to pursuing wealth and more generous with their possessions.</td>
<td>McCullough et al., 2002</td>
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<td>Gratitude and &quot;materialistic striving&quot; have an inverse correlation.</td>
<td>Polak &amp; McCullough, 2006</td>
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<td>Case managers visited their adolescent clients more frequently when a &quot;thank you&quot; note was sent to them by their managers after visits.</td>
<td>Clark, Northrop, &amp; Barkshire, 1988</td>
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<td>Tips were larger when a &quot;Thank You&quot; was placed on the bottom of the bill.</td>
<td>Rind &amp; Bordia, 1995</td>
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<td>Thanking people for their business led to an increase in sales.</td>
<td>Carey, Clique, Leighton, &amp; Milton, 1976</td>
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<td>Gratitude increases efforts to assist benefactors even when such efforts are costly and this effect is unique from the outcome produced by an increase in general positive affect.</td>
<td>Bartlett &amp; DeSteno, 2006</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical Benefits</td>
<td>Gratitude interventions led to better sleep duration and quality, fewer physical complaints, and more time spent in physical exercise.</td>
<td>Emmons &amp; McCullough, 2003; Emmons &amp; Crumpler, 2000</td>
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<td>Gratitude may help with cardiovascular and immune functioning.</td>
<td>McCrory &amp; Childre, 2004</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Gratitude to God reduced the negative effects of stress on health for older adults (especially for women).</td>
<td>Krause, 2006</td>
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</table>
All clients can benefit from even simple and infrequent attempts at fostering gratitude, but the goal of developing a more grateful disposition takes much effort and persistence. Everyone, whether religiously oriented or not, can benefit from enhancing their gratitude and can find much for which to be grateful. For religiously oriented clients, a grateful perspective on life is most likely to be present when it is connected to an active awareness of God's gracious benevolence in their lives. For those with such a perspective, no experience loses its potential to teach and bless when they acknowledge God as acting in their best interest. This becomes a catalyst for increased well-being, leads to seeing the gifts in life more clearly, and kindles a desire to share their good fortune with others. Ultimately, from an LDS perspective, the most important functions of gratitude include softening and lifting hearts, and opening a channel that allows God to work in and through them more effectively.

**INTERVENTION PRINCIPLES AND PROCEDURES**

Experiencing and expressing gratitude has significant beneficial effects in a variety of domains. Given that there are specific positive benefits from experiencing gratitude, the following questions are relevant: How can therapists intervene to promote gratitude? What principles can maximize the utility of gratitude interventions?

**Gratitude Intervention Strategies**

Since writing may be an important element of the following interventions, some research indicates that a different approach should be used in writing about positive versus negative experiences. For example, Lyubomirsky, Sousa, and Dickerhoof (2006) found that “private thought about a positive life event was associated with higher satisfaction with life than writing or talking about that event” (p. 701). When writing about negative events, the analytical nature of writing was helpful in making sense out of experiences, while just thinking or ruminating about problems did not help. Just the opposite was found with positive events. The act of analytical writing about positive events diminished the pleasure of these events. In contrast, focusing on reliving, replaying, and rehearsing positive experiences sustains and maximizes pleasure related to positive events. Therefore, if clients are asked to write about their gratitude experiences, consider having them write in a way that minimizes analysis and maximizes reliving and savoring. Encourage descriptive rather than analytical writing by inviting them to “bask” in the experience again and include as much detail as possible, such as their thoughts and emotions at the time.

**Counting Blessings.** This generally involves listing 3-5 blessings (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). It has been implemented daily, a few times a week, or weekly. Certain domains of focus can be suggested for clients to consider (e.g., health, relationships, noted improvements, lessons learned, etc.).

**Making a “Gratitude Visit.”** This was described in the Seligman et al. (2005) study. It had a significant positive short-term impact, which diminished over time. Ask clients to think about someone toward whom they feel a special sense of gratitude, write that person a gratitude letter, and then make a personal visit to express thanks and deliver the letter. Here is an adaptation of Martin Seligman’s (personal communication, August 23, 2006) elements for this intervention:

- Think of the people—parents, friends, teachers, coaches, teammates, employers, and so on—who have been especially kind to you but whom you have never properly thanked.
- Choose someone you could meet for a face-to-face meeting in the next week.
- Write a specific and concrete gratitude letter that details how this individual affected your life for good, and deliver it in person.
- Call the person in advance to schedule a time to get together.
- Share the contents of the letter with the person, including how you are doing now.
- After this visit, take a moment to think about each of the following questions:
  - How did you feel as you wrote your letter?
  - How did the other person react to your expression of gratitude?
  - How were you affected by their reaction?
  - Would you like to express your gratitude to someone else in a similar manner?
  - To whom?

**Creating a Gratitude Catalogue.** Encourage clients to spend a week developing a comprehensive list of all their blessings. After they have listed the obvious, see if they notice a shift to “smaller” blessings (e.g., running
water, electricity, etc.). Help them consider as blessings things that were not previously experienced as such (e.g., the ability to experience pain of all kinds because it is a signal that something needs attention, a demanding assignment because it helped them learn something about their capabilities, the person who cut in front of them because that experience gave them the opportunity to choose a higher road, etc.).

**Appreciating Progress.** Help clients recognize and appreciate their progress. Those with perfectionistic tendencies may especially benefit from this intervention. Mood can influence thought and memory, so depressed individuals may find it difficult to see progress. Here are some examples: “Are you closer to reaching your goals?” “Has your health improved?” “Have your relationships improved?” Sometimes it is helpful to begin with minimal signs, such as, “I’m no longer actively suicidal.” Help them generate grateful feelings, even if they start small.

**Appreciating “Small” Things.** Most blessings are of the “small” variety. Barbara Frederickson (2003) suggests that “you can infuse ordinary events with meaning by expressing appreciation, love and gratitude, even for simple things” (p. 335). Small blessings are always available. Waiting for “big” events to occur before experiencing gratitude is counterproductive since they happen infrequently and often produce less “punch” than expected, and since, through adaptation, the effects wear off sooner than anticipated. Learning to regularly appreciate small things leads to greater awareness and mindfulness. When the authors were in elementary school we were taught to “stop, look, and listen” before crossing the street. In the service of appreciating small things, invite your clients to “stop, look, and listen” for a grateful feeling, moment, or experience that has happened during the day. Assign clients to think or write on the following ideas:

- Consider three things that they usually take for granted that made them feel peaceful, happy, content, satisfied, or fulfilled today (e.g., I had a good night’s sleep, I enjoyed the fall colors on the trees, I had the chance to read a good book, my friend called and we did something together, etc.).
- Consider three things that didn’t occur today that would have been distressing, unpleasant, or discouraging (e.g., I didn’t get sick, I didn’t fail the exam, I didn’t get yelled at, etc.).

**Taking Things For Granted.** Encourage clients to make a list of the things they take for granted. Too often blessings are in plain view but have become invisible. When clients actively renew their attention and remind themselves of these blessings, they experience an increase in gratitude.

**Eliminating Ungrateful Thoughts.** Elder Jeffrey R. Holland’s (2007) counsel is applicable: “No misfortune is so bad that whining about it won’t make it worse” (p. 18). Have clients identify and list their complaining and ungrateful thoughts and replace them with grateful thoughts and problem solving strategies. Clients are prone to gratitude and less likely to complain when they remember how others have contributed to their well-being, when they search for lessons in challenging times, and when they focus on positive action rather than passive complaining.

**Expressing a Gratitude Prayer.** Suggest to spiritually oriented clients that they regularly take time to dedicate an entire prayer for expressions of gratitude. Encourage them to be specific and to go beyond the obvious. Going beyond the obvious may involve little twists; for example, being grateful for the ability to experience emotional pain because it means they still care; or, in the face of chronic problems, being grateful for the fact that this week was no worse than last week; or being grateful that God gave them the ability to endure another day; When they recognize the extent of God’s mercy in their lives, they may also increase their love for Him.

**Using Gratitude Language.** Train clients to use the language of gratitude. This can occur by frequently writing notes of appreciation. Help them find ways to say “thank you” in a meaningful way, both to those they are close to as well as others they encounter, such as the bagger, the cashier, or the postal worker. Have them focus on consciously and frequently thinking, saying, and writing grateful things.

**Using Downward Social Comparisons.** If clients are experiencing difficulty in feeling gratitude, have them think of situations they are glad they don’t experience, such as famine, war, or debilitating illness. Invite them to think of someone they would not want to trade places with who seems to have things harder than they do. Have them say and think things such as, “At least I don’t have to deal with chronic pain.” Help them recognize that although their situation is not ideal, it could be worse. Encourage them to be grateful that it is not worse, while continuing to hope and work towards
Discovering Unexpected Gratitude. Challenging times may provide the most important opportunities for grateful thinking. Some have called this “benefit finding” (Affleck & Tennen, 1996). Finding ways to experience some element of gratitude in difficult circumstances helps clients endure and even thrive, as referred to in the opening story of this article.

Invite clients to think about a current situation that is troubling them. What can they find in that experience for which to be grateful? They might find opportunities to learn something new, to practice something hard, to develop courage, to learn to trust in God, to find out more about themselves, to appreciate the support that is available to them, and to recognize that the situation is making them more patient, empathic, or less judgmental.

Life’s difficult experiences temper and refine, and although this is sometimes quite painful, often the most significant points of growth come through these experiences. They can provide the focus for future efforts to change things that are experienced as unjust or unfair or to prevent bad things from happening to others. Much of the good in this world has come about from suffering that is transformed into a social contribution. Often, the attempt to find benefits in challenges actually changes the nature of the problem itself, leading to new solutions.

Promoting Marital Gratitude. Expressions of gratitude enhance any relationship. When marital conflict or tension is high, or couples are discouraged or suffering painful hurts, it is helpful to encourage partners to take time out to focus on things they appreciate about each other. This must be done carefully and appropriately and not as an avoidance maneuver that circumvents real problems. The couple should not use this as a tool of manipulation. When undertaken seriously and sincerely, it brings increased awareness to the positive traits and behaviors in one’s spouse, softens hearts, and promotes healthier environments for mutual problem solving. Sometimes the expressions of gratitude are the solution.

For a list of further gratitude resources, see the Appendix.

Gratitude Intervention Principles

The following principles can help maximize the utility of gratitude interventions.

Effort and Continuity. Long-term benefits from gratitude interventions are more likely when there is continued commitment to implementation. One-time interventions such as the “Gratitude Visit” (Seligman et al., 2005) had an immediate significant positive impact, but at a 3-month follow-up, adaptation had returned individuals to their baseline emotional state. Sustained commitment is necessary. As Seligman et al. (2005) found, “The degree to which participants actively continued their assigned exercise on their own and beyond the prescribed one-week period mediated the long-term benefits” (p. 416).

Self-Concordance. Individuals show greater commitment to performing gratitude exercises when interventions are more congruent with their values and needs (i.e., self-concordance; Sheldon, 2002). Motivation is easier to sustain when activities have intrinsic value. Self-concordance is enhanced when interventions are tailored and a rationale is given related to the individual’s basic needs and values. Implementation improves with specific and concrete plans that clients help create.

Therapy dropout rates varied significantly in a randomly controlled trial study of the treatment of depression conducted by Seligman, Rashid, & Parks (2006), with a 13% drop out rate for Positive Psychotherapy, a 40% drop out rate for treatment as usual, and a 29% drop out rate for treatment as usual with antidepressant medications. The significantly lower drop out rate of the Positive Psychotherapy participants may indicate that clients find positive and additive interventions easier and more compelling to carry out.

Variation. Varying interventions help to keep activities fresh, staving off the effects of adaptation. Interventions may lose some of their efficacy if they become too habitual, but developing a grateful attitude does take sustained and regular practice. To minimize the effects of adaptation, vary the way gratitude exercises are enacted; for example, change the domain of focus (e.g., health could be the focus on one occasion, sources of social support on another occasion, and looking for the “silver lining” in adversity on yet another occasion). Varying the frequency or intensity of interventions (e.g., once a week or three times a week rather than every day) may maximize effectiveness. Implementing different types of gratitude interventions, as well as interspersing non-gratitude interventions, may also be useful.

Variation may conflict somewhat with the principle of effort and continuity. Whereas Emmons and
McCullough (2003) found that daily listings were generally more "powerful" than weekly listings of gratitude, Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005) found that well-being increased only in those participants who counted their blessings once a week rather than three times a week.

Social and Self Comparisons. Gratitude often arises out of social comparisons. For example, increased gratitude may be experienced by our clients when they encounter someone whose health is worse than their own, or someone who has difficulty even obtaining the basics of life. Downward social comparison processes are at work when individuals see themselves as better off than another. This is an effective method for facilitating gratitude if it does not turn to judgment about the other person or pride about abilities and/or circumstances (i.e., "I did it, why can't they"). Comparisons with self may have fewer negative consequences. If clients can see how things are improving (comparisons with their past), or how they are getting closer to what they want (comparisons with their ideals), they are prone to experience gratitude. Those with very high self-comparison standards, such as perfectionists, may find this difficult. Self-comparisons may not work when a person's situation is deteriorating, such as through poor health or aging. Other gratitude interventions can be helpful in these situations as they reflect on other aspects of their lives (e.g., a life well lived, the small things of life, the kindness of others, etc.).

Social Support. Social support is helpful in implementing many kinds of activities. Whenever the assistance of another can be used to help clients practice gratitude, it is more likely that gratitude will occur. Encourage clients to observe, seek out, and associate with someone they think is particularly grateful. This individual may be thought of as a gratitude coach. Becoming more aware of the power of social support may also become a source of gratitude.

Attentional Focus. Much of the value of gratitude is due to clients shifting their attention from hassles and problems towards things that are going well and blessings. The experience of increased positive emotions leads to improved problem solving. Gratitude counters the tendency to ruminate about problems and avoid problem solving efforts. Rumination has been found to be a major factor in depression, anxiety, and inability to overcome interpersonal hurts (Bono & McCullough, 2006). A shift towards a grateful perspective serves as a form of "distraction" and refocuses attention on potential positives rather than on feared or experienced negatives, providing a balanced and broader perspective on current challenges. Current research indicates that it only takes 8 minutes of distraction to help a person feel better (Lyubomirsky & Tkach, 2003). A grateful orientation shifts attention towards things that are going well, successes, "silver linings," and "small gifts" such as smell, sight, touch, and so forth.

Cultivating Empathy. Empathy is an essential factor in experiencing gratitude. Those who cannot empathize with others will find it difficult to see the efforts and sacrifices made on their behalf. Without empathy, they may view the actions of others as being merely self-serving. Just as gratitude requires empathy, it also cultivates empathy. Being able to see blessings is part and parcel of recognizing the benevolent actions of others. Indeed, clients may recognize that at times they don't even merit the gifts bestowed upon them. In cultivating empathy, they may recognize a mutual dependence on others and may have a desire (versus a feeling of obligation) to return kindness.

Acceptance. There are two forms of acceptance, active and passive. Active acceptance is the ability to accept, embrace, and even welcome the gifts of life in whatever form they arrive, believing that they can teach and refine. This is not a masochistic, "suffering proves how much God loves me" perspective. It is not seeking out suffering. Active acceptance is fostered by believing in a benevolent God who has the well-being of His children in mind. Those who believe that God is a "potter" and that He is shaping His "clay" (Isaiah 64:8) recognize that some of His stretching, pinching, and kneading may be painful prior to the finished vessel being revealed. Active acceptance is recognizing that the design of life allows for and even calls for a portion of adversity along with life's privileges. Active acceptance acknowledges that the positive experiences of life are inextricably intertwined with the ability to experience pain and disappointment. Paul's declaration is one demonstration of this attitude: "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Paul's attitude reflects active acceptance, since he sees something positive coming from his infirmities.

Those who accept, tolerate, or acknowledge things as
they are rather than as they wish things were, especially regarding things that cannot be changed, are demonstrating passive acceptance. Passive acceptance is more about enduring than learning. It may even be somewhat fatalistic (i.e., just “grit it out” until it is over). Both attitudes can prove useful.

The ability to accept things as they are and to find benefit even when wishing they were different is a component of gratitude. Obsessing over things that cannot be controlled limits our ability to feel grateful. Those who adopt an active acceptance come to see that almost every experience may have laden within it some gift, some benefit, something that will make them better one way or another. As President Brigham Young taught, as cited in the Discourses of Brigham Young (Widstoe, 1954), “Every trial and experience you have passed through is necessary for your salvation” (p. 345). Acknowledging that some circumstances or conditions cannot be controlled may actually prove helpful in fostering gratitude (e.g., although my son is struggling and I can’t control his decisions, I am grateful that God’s grace is available to him and me). Gratitude leads to increased feelings of contentment, peace, joy, hope, and happiness even when circumstances are uncontrollable. When appropriate, encourage clients to accept their situation with all its “thorns.” When fitting, constructively explore the possible lessons to be found even in challenging circumstances.

CONCLUSION

Individually designing interventions using the principles listed above will assist therapists in their efforts to cultivate attitudes of gratitude within their clients. Help minimize anticipation of failure. Let clients know that any effort is itself a part of the victory, whether they feel increased gratitude or not and whether they feel happier or not. Encourage realistic expectations about intervention outcomes. Assist clients to develop habits of gratitude that may lead to an increased disposition towards thankfulness.

Cultivating gratitude promotes positive affect and perspective and all the benefits derived from an increase in happiness. A healthier perspective can be developed through an increase in grateful thinking, as Mary Ann Mellor found in the introductory story. This article has surveyed the benefits of gratitude and suggested ways to cultivate it for therapeutic gain. It supports and reinforces what church leaders have taught: “Live with a spirit of thanksgiving and you will have greater happiness and satisfaction in life. Even in your most difficult times, you can find much to be grateful for” (For the Strength of Youth, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, p. 6). Sister Bonnie D. Parkin (2007) thoughtfully summarized the powerful effects of gratitude when she declared, "Gratitude is a Spirit-filled principle... grateful awareness heightens our sensitivity to divine direction. When we communicate gratitude, we can be filled with the Spirit and connected to those around us and the Lord. Gratitude inspires happiness and carries divine influence” (p. 35).

REFERENCES


THERAPEUTIC GRATITUDE


tion at the convention of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, New Orleans, LA.


Depressed individuals show less gratitude. Presentation at the 1998 joint convention of the Western Psychological Association and the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association, Albuquerque, NM.

Footnotes

1 Positive psychology was named and formally launched by Martin Seligman during his tenure as President of the American Psychological Association in 1999. His initiative brought together a collection of researchers and practitioners under a common umbrella. It has been defined as “the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions” (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 104), the “scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues” (Sheldon & King, 2001, p. 216), and the scientific study of “what makes life worth living” (Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006, p. 5). The current focus on human strengths is receiving scientific investigation designed to help us better understand the role, influence, and effects of personal and community strengths and virtues.

2 The emotional baseline of most individuals appears to be slightly positive (Reis & Gable, 2003) if no strong positive or negative events are occurring. The adaptation effect or habituation suggests that the impact of positive or negative events (Brickman & Campbell, 1971) naturally diminishes over time, bringing people back to their emotional baseline, so that individuals are often no happier or unhappier than before the positive/negative event. This adaptation often occurs more quickly than most assume. Some have concluded that “bad is stronger than good” (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001) because “negative events appear to elicit more physiological, affective, cognitive, and behavioral activity and prompt more cognitive analysis than neutral or positive events” (Taylor, 1991, p. 67). Therefore, significant negative events such as acquiring a permanent disability may alter levels of happiness more than significant positive events. In general, though, adaptation is active in the ordinary and common events in life and may help to explain why even though a favorite team wins a championship, the effects of their victory wear off fairly quickly, and even though individuals may be involved in a fender bender, they return fairly quickly to their normal levels of happiness. There are many explanations for this mechanism. One reason for this effect may be the “signaling” function of emotions. If individuals remained emotionally aroused, either too high or too low, their physiological alert systems would not work appropriately to signal them about new events in their life, such as a threat or an opportunity. Adaptation seems to be more active in some domains of life than in others. Whereas acquiring a new possession may give only a quick temporary boost to happiness and be very reactive to the forces of adaptation, developing a new friendship would likely have a stronger, more lasting impact on happiness and be less influenced by adaptation. This adaptation effect seems to indicate that some things contribute more effectively to lasting happiness. All of this leads to the question of just how malleable happiness is, and whether therapists can and should work to increase an individual’s level of happiness over a sustained period of time, or whether there is a natural “set point.” Are positive or negative changes in happiness doomed (in the case of positive affect) or destined (in the case of negative affect) to return to this “set point”?

APPENDIX

Additional Gratitude Resources


