Chapter 88

Gratitude and Subjective Well–Being:
Cultivating Gratitude for a Harvest of Happiness

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter we review the good of gratitude and recommend various methods for cultivating this human strength. First, we show how gratitude is indeed good. We show how gratitude is important to flourishing and happiness. Gratitude is strongly correlated with various measures of well-being, and experimental studies suggest that gratitude actually causes increases in happiness. If gratitude is good, then it behooves us to investigate how the disposition of gratitude can be enhanced. We suggest that grateful responding can be enhanced by training in noticing the good in one's life, and by encouraging interpretations and appraisals that have been found to promote gratitude. We then present a discussion of unresolved issues in the science of gratitude. This is followed by a discussion of who might benefit most from gratitude. We conclude with a summary of the cultivation of gratitude. Research strongly supports the idea that the cultivation of gratitude should result in a harvest of happiness, but cultivating gratitude is not likely to be an easy process.

INTRODUCTION

True contentment is a thing as active as agriculture. – -G. K. Chesterton

The epigraph by Chesterton (1986) suggests that true happiness is not an easy pursuit. Like farming, the cultivation of happiness takes time, focus, and effort—one does not simply slide into happiness. We believe that Chesterton's agriculture metaphor is effective for understanding the development of subjective well-being (SWB), and in this chapter we will argue that the cultivation of gratitude may be one of the most effective ways of harvesting happiness. In order to accomplish this goal, we first will establish the foundations of a science of gratitude, discussing basic definitions and means of measuring gratitude. We then turn to the focus of the chapter: the good of gratitude, explaining how gratitude is important for human flourishing. If gratitude is important to well-being, it behooves us to understand how gratitude can be cultivated, and we spend considerable space exploring this issue. We will then discuss unresolved issues in gratitude research, and conclude the chapter by showing who benefits most from gratitude interventions. Our goals for this chapter are to describe gratitude, identify needed areas of gratitude research, and show how one may use gratitude to enhance their happiness.

Foundations for a Science of Gratitude

In order to investigate any phenomenon in science, we must first be able to define and measure it effectively. This is, of course, no less true of gratitude, and in this section, we discuss the definition and measurement of gratitude. As Rosenberg (1998) explained, any emotion may be described at one of three levels: state, mood, or trait. Thus, we will attempt to define gratitude at the level of emotional state (the relatively brief psychophysiological response to the appraisal of an event), mood state (the more enduring emotional state operating in the background of awareness), and affective trait (the enduring disposition for a particular emotion).

Defining and Measuring Gratitude as an Emotional State

Following Emmons (2004), we have defined gratitude as the emotion people experience "when they affirm that something good has happened to them, and they recognize that someone else is largely responsible for this benefit" (Watkins & McCurrach, in press). We take a broad approach to "something good", in that the benefit need not be constrained to a specific place and time, and the "good" of the event may be in the awareness that something bad did not happen (as in one's flight landing safely in the midst of a storm). Although some definitions of the grateful state simply require that the benefit be attributed to an external source, we submit that the external source is explicitly or implicitly perceived as an intentional agent. This personalization of the source of a benefit may not be conscious, and indeed many people are grateful for events that may not be attributed to human cause. Thus, the benefactor may be a human, but it might also be divine, and later we discuss new research related to gratitude to God.

It appears that the emotion of gratitude may be measured in a fairly straightforward manner. The Gratitude Adjectives Scale (GAS; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002) simply asks participants to respond to three adjectives (grateful, thankful, and appreciative) on a Likert-type scale, and this appears to be a valid assessment of the grateful state. More recently, another state gratitude measure has emerged

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