

The Inverse Relationship Between Gratitude and Entitlement



This week one of your chapters in *Essentials* discussed emotions. One emotion of some significance not discussed is that of gratitude, and I would like to discuss this emotion in these few pages.

Research done with people both young and old reveals very interesting conclusions on the role of gratitude. Author and researcher, Dr. Robert Emmons, from the University of California Davis, believes he knows what gives life meaning: pure and simple gratitude.

Emmons' team found that people who view life as a gift and consciously acquire an "attitude of gratitude" experience multiple advantages. Gratitude improves emotional and physical health, and can strengthen relationships and communities. Some strategies include keeping a gratitude journal, learning prayers of gratitude, and using visual reminders. "Without gratitude, life can be lonely, depressing and impoverished," said Emmons. "Gratitude enriches human life. It elevates, energizes, inspires and transforms. People are moved, opened and humbled through expressions of gratitude." Here's a little something else from Emmons on gratitude:

<http://www.dailygood.org/story/532/how-gratitude-can-help-you-through-hard-times/>

Unfortunately, cultivating an "attitude of gratitude" isn't easy.

A Sense of Gratitude and Entitlement Among Students

It is, according to Emmons, a "chosen attitude." We must be willing to recognize and acknowledge that we are the recipients of an unearned benefit. This is especially rare among middle-class high school and college students who've grown up in a world that's revolved around them; one that allows them to build a platform via social media without displaying value; one that repeatedly communicates they are "awesome" (what an overused term these days) and deserve trophies just for playing. This world actually cultivates a sense of entitlement. As an example, I was talking to another professor in my office and a student barges into my office sits in a chair with her computer and tells me she is having trouble with BlackBoard. I told her to step outside my office and that I would be with her in a few minutes—after my discussion with the professor who was in my office. [Perhaps we professors have created such behavior by often

stopping what we are doing and attending to student concerns. After a while, students start believing they are special and deserving of immediate attention.] Students (of course this is a generalization that is not appropriate for all) feel they deserve any good they've received. It is, in fact, contrary to the growth of a spirit of gratitude. Entitlement is virtually the opposite of gratitude: as I feel more entitled, my gratitude shrinks in proportion.

But I just don't want to be negative. I received an email from another student who had some difficulties with a term paper and after we resolved the issue he wrote back:

Hi Dr. Von,

Amazing! Thank you.

Joseph

Do such small things like I've mentioned here influence behavior? In my last class in Behavioral Management I assigned the following book: *The Small B!G: Small Changes that Spark Big Influence* by Martin, Goldstein, and Cialdini. And you say?

Research indicates that gratitude is not merely a positive emotion—it can improve your health if cultivated. Research also indicates that students must give up a “victim mentality” and overcome a sense of entitlement and deservedness. Think for a moment. When someone feels entitled to something, there's little need for gratitude: “*I don't need to thank someone; I deserved the gift. In fact, these people are lucky to have me around. I'm amazing.*”

When we examine the areas where students struggle today, they are areas in which gratitude would actually aid them in their growth:

- Energy levels and motivation.
- Mental and emotional well-being.
- Academic achievement.
- Healthy, long-term relationships.
- Dealing with tragedy and crisis.

In one study, researchers had participants test a number of different gratitude exercises, such as thinking about a living person for whom they were grateful, writing about someone for whom they were grateful, and writing a letter to deliver to someone for whom they were grateful. Participants in the control condition were asked to describe a room in their house (neutral). Participants who engaged in a gratitude exercise showed increases in positive emotion immediately after the exercise, with this result being strongest for participants who were asked to think about a person for whom they were grateful. What's more, participants who had grateful personalities to begin with showed the greatest benefit from these gratitude exercises. In people

who are grateful in general, life events have little influence on experienced gratitude (McCullough, Tsang & Emmons, 2004; available on Dr. McCullough's Main Page below). In other words, it's a state of mind.

Gratitude isn't just an emotion that happens along, but a virtue we can cultivate. Think of it as something you practice as you might meditation or yoga.

Gratitude practice begins by **paying attention**. Notice all the good things you normally take for granted. Did you sleep well last night? Did someone at work or on the street treat you with courtesy? Have you caught a glimpse of the sky, with its sun and clouds, and had a moment of peace? It also involves acknowledging that difficult and painful moments are instructive and you can be grateful for them as well. Directing our attention this way blocks feelings of victimhood.

Second, consider **writing** about it in a journal or in a letter. Writing helps you organize thoughts, accept experiences, and put them into context, and gratitude journaling may bring a new and redemptive frame of reference to difficult life situations. It also helps you create meaning when you place everyday experiences within a framework of gifts and gratefulness. By writing, you can magnify and expand on the sources of goodness in your life, and think about what resources you've gained from your experiences, even bad ones.

In one study, people randomly assigned to keep weekly gratitude journals exercised more regularly, reported fewer physical symptoms, felt better about their lives, and were more optimistic about the upcoming week compared to people assigned to record hassles or neutral events. In another, young adults who kept a daily gratitude journal reported higher alertness, enthusiasm, determination, attentiveness and energy compared to those who focused on hassles or compared themselves to others less fortunate.

Finally, **expressing** gratitude completes the feeling of connection. Many people in your life have helped you in one way or another. Have you thanked them? Consider sending a letter to someone telling them what their actions meant to you, even if—especially if—it happened long ago. As for a response to blessings that don't come from people, the arts and many faith traditions offer countless ways to express our gratitude. It may be as simple as a moment of deliberate reflection.

Perhaps it would be good for all of us to stop and think about who might be deserving a thank you and a show of appreciation from us. An "attitude of gratitude" will serve us well.

Wise bosses (and you are one or will be one, right?) don't just display empathy, compassion, and appreciation through dramatic and memorable gestures, they convey it through tiny and seemingly trivial gestures. A host of renowned leaders talk about the importance of thanking people, about the power of this small gesture, and how failure to express appreciation to people who are working their tails off is a sign of disrespect. The late Robert Townsend, former CEO of Avis Rent-a-Car and author of *UP the Organization*, defined "thanks" as "a really neglected form of compensation." Max DePree, former CEO of furniture giant Herman Miller, described saying

“thank you” as among a leader’s primary jobs. I thought all this talk about something so small and so obvious was overblown until a professor from another school told me about a trip he took with his university president to China. The logistics of the trip were difficult, as it was a traveling road show where transportation, hotel accommodations, meetings, and hundreds of other little details had to be orchestrated. The staff traveling with the group worked twelve to sixteen hours a day on these chores and did a magnificent job. Yet my colleague reported that even though the president made many requests of the staff during the trip, he never once thanked them. This lack of gratitude was demoralizing, as they catered to his every whim but weren’t otherwise noticed or appreciated.

Too often projects end without acknowledgement and celebration, and whether the project succeeded or failed, the best managers take a few hours to express appreciation. Expressing gratitude is especially important when the stench of failure is in the air. These are times when people most need support from the boss and each other. And doing so sets the stage for learning from the fiasco rather than for “blamestorms” or “circular firing squads,” where the goal is to point fingers, humiliate the guilty, and throw a few overboard.

To read more about gratitude go to Dr. McCullough’s web page on gratitude

http://www.psy.miami.edu/faculty/mmccullough/Gratitude_Page.htm. Dr. McCullough has done much work on gratitude.