Santa Paula Unified School District

Mental Health Matters

November 2024

Gratitude - A Mental Health Game Changer

Gratitude can be a game changer. It helps train your brain to notice and appreciate the little things in life and, in doing so, shifts your life experience tremendously. Gratitude can increase your happiness and wellbeing, life satisfaction, even overall health while decreasing the stuff we all want less of like anxiety, depression, and anger. It can be a powerful practice to cultivate, especially if you struggle with anxiety or depression.

How Gratitude Relates to Anxiety and Depression

While anxiety and depressive disorders come in different forms and flavors, they share some commonalities. All are associated with underlying negative thinking patterns. These patterns include both what we think and how we think. In other words, both the content and the process of thinking impact anxiety and depression.

The content of anxious and depressive thinking is often negative in nature. Common forms of negative thinking include: overly focusing on negative aspects or problem areas (called the negativity bias), discounting the positives ("yeah but"-ing away any positive aspect or occurrence), and catastrophizing or jumping to the worst case scenario.

The process of anxious and depressive thinking is characterized by mental time travel – dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. This mental time travel, known as rumination, pulls us out of the present moment and can add to feelings of depression and anxiety. In fact, psychological research shows that the more present we are, the happier we tend to be, even when the present moment isn't pleasant or enjoyable. The bottom line is that rumination is a sneaky mental habit that zaps us of joy.

This is where gratitude can be particularly helpful.

Gratitude as a Competing Response

In the world of habits, there's a treatment approach called Habit Reversal Training. A key component of HRT is the use of a competing response, which is an action that is incompatible with the habit you are trying to break. For example, if you're trying to break a nail biting habit, you might clasp your hands as a competing response when you feel the urge to bite. It's really difficult to claps your hands AND bite your nails at the same time. Consistently using a competing response trains your body to replace the undesired habit with the new one.

Rumination, worry, complaining, and negativity are mental habits, and ones with far worse consequences than nail biting. These mental habits involve stewing on negative thoughts, indulging them in a repeating and amplifying loop with the effect of dragging down your mood and pulling you out of the present moment. I propose that we try gratitude as a competing response for these mental habits. It's surprisingly difficult to tap into gratitude – really tap into it – and also get stuck in negativity.

Full article found at https://adaa.org/learn-from-us/from-the-experts/blog-posts/consumer/gratitude-mental-health-game-changer

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SPUSD

This newsletter is brought to you by the Mental Health Counselors:

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10 Ways to Practice Daily Gratitude

1. **Keep a Gratitude Journal.** Establish a daily practice in which you remind yourself of the gifts, grace, benefits, and good things you enjoy. Recalling moments of gratitude associated with ordinary events, your personal attributes, or valued people in your life gives you the potential to interweave a sustainable theme of gratefulness into your life.

2. **Remember the Bad.** To be grateful in your current state, it is helpful to remember the hard times that you once experienced. When you remember how difficult life used to be and how far you have come, you set up an explicit contrast in your mind, and this contrast is fertile ground for gratefulness.

3. **Ask Yourself Three Questions.** Meditate on your relationships with parents, friends, siblings, work associates, children, and partners using these three questions: "What have I received from __?", "What have I given to __?", and "What troubles and difficulty have I caused?"

4. **Share Your Gratitude with Others.** Research has found that expressing gratitude can strengthen relationships. So the next time your partner, friend or family member does something you appreciate, be sure to let them know.

5. **Come to Your Senses.** Through our senses—the ability to touch, see, smell, taste, and hear—we gain an appreciation of what it means to be human and of what an incredible miracle it is to be alive. Seen through the lens of gratitude, the human body is not only a miraculous construction, but also a gift.

6. **Use Visual Reminders.** Because the two primary obstacles to gratefulness are forgetfulness and a lack of mindful awareness, visual reminders can serve as cues to trigger thoughts of gratitude. Often times, the best visual reminders are other people.

7. **Make a Vow to Practice Gratitude.** Research shows that making an oath to perform a behavior increases the likelihood that the action will be executed. Therefore, write your own gratitude vow, which could be as simple as "I vow to count my blessings each day," and post it somewhere where you will be reminded of it every day.

8. **Watch Your Language.** Grateful people have a particular linguistic style that uses the language of gifts, givers, blessings, blessed, fortune, fortunate, and abundance. In gratitude, you should not focus on how inherently good you are, but rather on the inherently good things that others have done on your behalf.

9. **Go Through the Motions.** Grateful motions include smiling, saying thank you, and writing letters of gratitude. By "going through grateful motions," you'll trigger the emotion of gratitude more often.

10. **Think Outside the Box.** If you want to make the most out of opportunities to flex your gratitude muscles, you must look creatively for new situations and circumstances in which to feel grateful. Please share the creative ways you've found to help you practice gratitude.

Full article found at https://www.mindful.org/an-introduction-to-mindful-gratitude/