

October 2007 - Newsletter

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Gratitude: The Path to Happiness

Here's a seemingly impossible task – In the middle of your next busy day, put aside thoughts of work responsibilities or your kids' soccer schedule and take a minute to be thankful for what you have. According to recent research, you'll be much happier if you do!

Since 1998, Professor Robert Emmons of the University of California-Davis, has been studying the role that gratitude plays in happiness. As it turns out, grateful people are happy people. "People who show gratitude experience significantly higher levels of joy and other positive emotions," says Dr. Emmons. "They also seem much less bothered by minor illnesses and common stressors."

But gratitude was not a natural subject for Emmons. "Psychologists have a long history of studying things they're bad at. I was always someone who took things for granted." Indeed, his research revealed that a lot of people have obstacles to gratitude. The demands of everyday life and a resistance to being dependent on others are the two biggest. "Gratitude is the opposite of personal autonomy; you're acknowledging that you are dependent on others and that can be very hard for some people."

However, those who make a conscious effort to "take stock" of the good things in their lives as well as those who have helped make those things possible (parents, friends, co-workers, neighbors) report much higher levels of positive emotions and lower levels of stress and depression than those who are "me" centered. Grateful people also enjoy a greater sense of "connectedness" with their friends and family.

Other findings included:

- Those who maintained a "gratitude journal" and made daily entries for three weeks experienced better sleep quality and duration as well as more energy than the control group.
- "Gratitude journaling" resulted in quicker healing of illness and even seemed to lessen the pain of serious neuromuscular diseases.
- A "gratitude intervention" in children produced more positive academic attitudes toward school in comparison with the control group.
- Participants who maintained "gratitude journals" were significantly more likely to achieve personal goals (academic, interpersonal, health-based) over a two-month period than the control group.

If anger, fear, mistrust, or loneliness are impeding your ability to experience gratitude, you may wish to contact your Employee Assistance Program to discuss how to achieve a more positive outlook on life!