

“Happiness is an inside job” – William Arthur Ward

As Lockdown is starting to loosen up, I’m sure many of you are feeling nervous about what the world will feel like. The world has become a place that many feel fearful of. These kinds of concerns can have a real impact on our mental wellbeing. We may have adopted behaviours that are unhelpful, and a belief that the world is not a safe place to be.

We can help ourselves in this situation by adopting practices that make us feel secure, content and resilient, allowing us to find new ways of making life easier to deal with, and helpful ways of viewing the world in a more optimistic way.

Last month, I talked about thoughts and how we can choose how we think, which in turn makes us feel good and this has a positive effect on our behaviours and actions. This month I’m going to dive deeper into ‘gratitude’, and how to have a ‘gratitude practice’. I have touched on this in both of my articles, but I thought I’d share with you how incredible this technique can be when applied to your life.

There is so much out there on ‘gratitude’ and it’s become a trendy thing to do. Stationery shops are all full of trinkets and cards you can buy with the word “gratitude” plastered all over them, and sometimes things like this can make me cringe - but look beyond that, and you’ll see this is a technique that not only works, but it gets stronger the more you do it. It can have an incredible effect on all areas of your life.

Gratitude – “The quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness”.

The brain is an organ, which needs to be treated like a muscle. The more we strengthen it, the better it performs. The brain can get stuck in certain behaviours, beliefs and patterns. This is fine if they are having a positive effect on our lives. But, beware: negative thinking can be very addictive. Catch it and keep it positive as much as you can.

Gratitude is a way to encourage the brain to be more positive/supportive, so if we don’t strengthen the gratitude muscle in our brains, then the old thought patterns will come to the surface. I always say – if we don’t use it, we lose it.

The Science

Gratitude activates the ventral and dorsal medial pre-frontal cortex. These parts of the brain are responsible for the feelings of reward, morality, bonding, positive relationships and empathy.

Gratitude also increases important neurochemicals in our brain. When we ‘flip’ the brain to think positively, we get a surge of feel-good chemicals such as dopamine, serotonin and oxytocin. These chemicals contribute to helping us feel happy, safe, connected, close, etc.

The Benefits

Gratitude practice is something we have to consciously apply for it to work. If we want to get fit, we have to go to the gym; if we want to be happy, then we have to apply the exercise to get the results. So, this is a conscious commitment, which doesn’t work over night but the longer you use it, the stronger the effects will get.

Gratitude can help us in so many ways. It can help us to appreciate what we have and not what we haven’t got, which in turn encourages us to feel more content.

Gratitude can encourage us to talk in a more appreciative way using positive, kind and loving language and words can have a massive impact on our wellbeing. Especially if we apply it to the way we speak to, and about, ourselves.

Emotionally

It can help us emotionally. When we think of something we are grateful for, it shifts a toxic mindset into a positive one. When you write/speak/think in a grateful way, you can’t ruminate over or think about things that are negative, as the brain can only think of one thing at a time – it squeezes out negative emotions. By consciously choosing to focus on the good stuff, it stops us filling our minds with the bad stuff, which can really

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help alleviate depression, anxiety, low mood and stress. It helps us feel safe and connected. When we focus on the good in the people and world around us, it increases our sense of security.

Physically

It can help us sleep better and can make us feel more relaxed. It has been proven to help manage pain, reduce blood pressure and improve our immune system. When people feel more grateful for their health and their bodies/appearance, then there's no surprise that people want to start looking after themselves. As a result, people become more active and this increases their energy; this can have a knock-on effect on physical health.

Relationships

Gratitude can help with relationships. Genuinely and authentically acknowledging other people's contributions or successes can lead to new opportunities and connections with others. When we feel good about ourselves and our lives it has a knock-on effect with others.

People who feel great are nicer to others; people who feel bad about themselves or situations are more likely to be unkind to others. We will be naturally more sociable when we feel happy about who we are, and this will encourage more positive personal and working relationships.

"Gratitude rewards generosity and maintains the cycle of healthy and social behaviour"

Antonia Damasia, Director of the BCI and Dornsife Neuroimaging institute at the University of Southern California.

The more good stuff we as individuals put out into the world not only has a massive impact on the person(s) who is directly benefitting, it has a ripple effect on the world.

There are so many other benefits to gratitude it has a real upward effect on our lives.

How to start a gratitude practice:

- To remember when we feel bad to look outside of ourselves is a quick fix, if we go inside then we are making lasting, long term change.
- Consistency is the key – start small.
- Get into a routine – dedicate a time of the day when you can practice gratitude. Either in the morning or at night or both. Studies have shown if we dedicate 20 seconds at a time to gratitude it's long enough to create positive structural changes to the brain.
- Think of 3 things first thing in the morning and three things last thing at night that you are grateful for .
- Leave mobile phones out of the room, as this will stop you looking at them as soon as you wake up. This time could be spent thinking of great stuff that will start your day off on a positive start.
- If you're having a really bad day, (which you still will have even when you've practice gratitude for 10 years) the difference will be that you will be able to get yourself out of it much quicker. Practice moment to moment gratitude, where you say thank you for everything. So, your encouraging yourself to see the best bits in everything. It helps us not loose sight of the good stuff in the midst of a situation or event that is hard to deal with.
- Just say 'thank you' over and over again in situation where you may feel nervous or an emotion that is not helpful. You don't have to be saying 'thank you' for anything in particular, just the word has a positive impact on the brain, which has a knock on effect on how we feel and act.
- Set a timer on your phone that goes off every so often to remind you to stop and think of 3 things you are grateful for.
- Set passwords as words that remind you to be thankful.
- Create visual reminders like sticky notes, pictures or written text.
- Add gratitude onto another thing you do. Maybe, when you're making your morning cup of coffee use this time to be thankful. Do it when you're sitting at traffic lights, waiting for the bus, brushing your teeth, in the bath etc.
- Be specific – being grateful for your friends is great, but what is it that they do that you are actually thankful for?

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- The small things – the breeze on your skin, the sun on your face, a warm cosy bed. Encouraging our brain to see the small wins stops us wanting big fixes in life.

According to Harvard Happiness researcher, Shawn Achor, doing this for 21 days will encourage the brain to look at the world in a very different way. You'll see the world's positives rather than its threats.

- Write things down. Keep a journal, write in it every morning, night or throughout the day.
- Use a gratitude app.
- Write gratitude letters- these can be to yourself or someone else. You don't have to send them, just the act of writing down how you feel about someone can have profound effects on the way you feel. If you are brave enough to send them, it will not only make the participant feel fantastic, but it will make you feel great too. If you're really brave, actually read the letter out loud to that person yourself.
- Actually say 'thank you' to people.
- Encourage friends and family to have conversations that are grateful rather than negative. Set time aside at meal times for this.
- Set up a WhatsApp/Facebook groups where you and friend actively write and share the good stuff. We all too often moan when were with friends, try and lift each other up but celebrating your wins- big and small.
- If you have children get them to practice gratitude finish their day with this while tucking them in bed.
- Notice the good- the more we CHOOSE to see the good the happier we will be.
- Always ask yourself what are tuned into. Are you listening to negative or positive FM in your head? What frequency would you choose to tune in to? What's going to make you feel good?

Author profile: Rebecca has worked in education for nearly 20 years, starting off her career in a Fresh Start school in the city of Nottingham and soon taking over the position of Head of Art at Toot Hill School. Rebecca moved on from middle leadership to join the Associate School Leader team, where she was responsible for delivering training such as middle leadership courses, coordinating programmes including those for trainee teachers, NQTs and RQTs. Currently, Rebecca is a system support leader for Nova Education Trust and member of the Well-Being Working Group. Rebecca is passionate about people and working to supporting them in their career. Making sure teachers are happy and they truly enjoy coming to work is her real driver. This passion led her to train to be a mind-set coach. When she's not working in an educational setting, Rebecca delivers training to various schools, corporate settings and individuals on mind-set and being conscious about the way we think. Rebecca is also a qualified yoga and meditation instructor; she has written and delivered wellness days and high-end yoga retreats.