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“Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others.”

**— Marcus Tullius Cicero, 1st century BC
statesman, philosopher, lawyer**

Having an attitude of gratitude is a well-known cliché. But do you know why? What does gratitude do for people? How important is being grateful? Spoiler alert - if you like experiencing joy, it is very important. Studies find a strong association between gratefulness and happiness. Gratefulness is also correlated with mental health, physical well-being, relationship quality, and employee work ethic.

Gratitude is a positive emotion. Couples who express gratitude to each other feel more positive toward each other. Friends who show appreciation for each other are more empathetic and compassionate. Employees who receive compliments from their bosses work harder. People who focus on the positive are more joyful and optimistic. Thinking about good things and what you appreciate reduces stress. It even has a physiological effect. It generates dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin, all hormones that make you feel good.

In contrast, dwelling on what you don't have and what isn't working creates negative emotions. It causes your body to create adrenaline, norepinephrine, and cortisol, all stress hormones that make you tense. Thinking badly about your mate or coworkers creates anxiety, grief, anger, frustration, and despair. It can lead to depression and addiction. If you focus on what you don't have, you will never be satisfied. You will never have enough.

Studies on gratefulness also find those who have the fewest possessions and conveniences are often the most grateful. For example, people who live in poverty in third-world countries report being more grateful for what they have than those who are prosperous and live in abundance. People who suffer with handicapping conditions are often happier than those who have none. How could this be possible?

People in poverty are grateful for conveniences because they rarely have them. People who have health issues are grateful because they know what it's like to have issues. Having an attitude of gratitude comes from knowing what it's like to be without. Grateful people see the potential for good because they have experienced the bad. They are also free from the many stresses that come with abundance like cleaning, maintenance, repairing, securing, moving, storing, and disposing.

People who rarely get to dine out don't care if they have to travel a long distance and then wait in line to eat out. They are grateful for the opportunity because it's a scarce opportunity. In contrast, people who dine out anytime they want take it for granted. In fact, they are unhappy if they have to travel a long distance or wait in a long line. Grateful people don't complain. They appreciate their opportunities and have hope for more to come.

If abundance potentially inhibits gratefulness and happiness, should prosperous people sell all their possessions and give away all their conveniences so they can become grateful and happy? Should workers quit their jobs so they can become grateful for having jobs? Should motorists walk instead of drive to places so they can appreciate their automobiles? Should people go through a debilitating illness so they can appreciate the health they have? Should friends and mates end their relationships so they can become thankful for their companions? Perhaps for some, but there is an alternative.



Gratefulness and Joy – From Abundance or Adversity?

People can be grateful for what they have without adversity and despair. Gratefulness is an attitude and attitudes are a choice. We choose to be grateful. We choose to be happy. Regardless of our circumstances, good or bad, we can be thankful for what we have or hope to have in the future. We can see the positive. We can focus on that which is good.

Here are eleven strategies to focusing on the good, having an attitude of gratitude, and being happy:

- Appreciate who you are. Be self-aware of your skills, knowledge, accomplishments, and uniqueness. See your past mistakes and adversity as good learning experiences.
- Appreciate what you have. Give attention to the small things in your surroundings. Think about what you have and is going well instead of what you don't have or isn't going well.
- Compliment people. Build up people. Make people feel good about themselves. Send messages and thank-you notes to those for whom you are grateful.
- Do something for someone. Allocate time regularly to helping people. Volunteer. Seek to accomplish things with greater meaning than serving yourself.
- Think about and spend time with those you most appreciate. Enjoy uplifting relationships with family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, clients, partners, and caregivers.
- Record your good memories and gratefulness in a journal. Enjoy the process of “getting checks in boxes” and creating a source of memories for future reference.
- Recall your good memories and accomplishments. Smile and feel the excitement, happiness, and satisfaction from your prior experiences.
- Relax. Breathe deeply. Reflect or meditate on all that is good. Be present in the moment rather than ruminate on the past or worry about the future.
- Exercise your faith. Pray. Share your gratitude and challenges with God. Meet with others who share your values in bible study and prayer.
- If you are dealing with negative circumstances within your control, do something about them. Take action on issues that don't get better with time.
- Exercise. Go for a walk or ride a bike in a peaceful setting. Go to the gym. Take out your frustrations on the pavement or weight machines. Release your physical tension.

Or, if all else fails, do without. Do something to experience life without that which you are now taking for granted. Do without food for a day or two. Spend a few days without conveniences like running water, electricity, heat, air conditioning, your phone, transportation, or money. Spend a few days in isolation. Then see how grateful you are when you get back that which you did without. Experience what the American musician Willie Nelson experienced when he said, “When I started counting my blessings, my whole life turned around.”

Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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