

HEALTH

Be grateful for this: Gratitude can improve our mental health

BY SAM JONES

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As the holidays approach, it's hard to go anywhere without hearing the word gratitude – and that's not a bad thing.

Gratitude is a positive emotion that recognizes the good that others have brought to our lives and is important both for our relationships and physical health. Gratitude has also been linked to decreased loneliness.

The first meta-analysis looking at the association between gratitude and loneliness found that across dozens of studies, gratitude had a significant inverse relationship to loneliness – as gratitude increased, loneliness decreased. This finding and others reinforce the importance of cultivating gratitude and point to its potential in helping combat the current loneliness epidemic.

“What loneliness is really all about is this perception that the kinds of social relationships I have, quantity and/or quality, are not up to par with what I desire,” said James Hittner, a



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professor of psychology at the College of Charleston in South Carolina. People who are lonely are more likely to socially isolate and have a greater risk of depression.

How gratitude is linked with loneliness

Hittner and his former undergraduate student Calvin Widholm analyzed 26 studies that reported an associa-

tion between gratitude and loneliness and found an inverse relationship between the two. Across the studies, if a person scored above average on gratitude, there was a 62.4 percent chance they would score below average on loneliness.

Hittner was not surprised by the findings but was glad to see such a robust inverse correlation.

“It is totally one of those things where you think, ‘Well, yeah, of course.’ But it’s really nice to see that actually the data pans out that way, as well,” said Glenn Fox, a neuroscientist who was not involved with the study.

Fox, who is now an assistant professor of clinical entrepreneurship at University of Southern California Marshall School of Business, published the first direct study of gratitude in the brain in 2015. He

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and his colleagues found that participants who experienced gratitude showed increased activity in a region near the front of the brain called the medial prefrontal cortex, known to be involved in social bonding and joy.

Finding such a strong association between greater gratitude and decreased loneliness “really emphasizes the notion that gratitude-enhancement interventions should specifically target loneliness as an outcome,” Hittner said.

That’s something social psychologist Monica Bartlett has focused on for nearly two decades.

What can gratitude do for us?

Bartlett, a professor at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, said she studies how our emotions have evolved to serve a purpose. “And so from that perspective, I’ve always been thinking about, ‘What is it that gratitude does for us?’” she said.

Bartlett and her colleagues evaluated the effect of gratitude on loneliness and health in older adults in a 2019 study. Over the course of 20 days, they asked participants to write down a couple of things each day that they were grateful for and, importantly, connect those things to someone else. That could be another person but also

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a pet or even a higher being.

“We can think about this more broadly,” Bartlett said. They found that cultivating this simple practice led to a decrease in loneliness and, consequently, an increase in well-being in the participants assigned to the gratitude-writing task.

Setting up a gratitude practice to combat loneliness

1. Write down three things you are grateful for that happen each day, no matter how small, and who helped make them happen, Bartlett suggested.

You will get into the habit of scanning your day for what’s going well and

how others helped make it possible. That new mindset will be “superseding, overriding more negative views,” which are typically much more salient to people, Bartlett said. “We seem to be ready as humans to scan our world and notice the negative, because the costs of not noticing might have been significant,” she said.

This is the famous negativity bias wherein people evolved to pay more attention to and more powerfully recall things that are dangerous or threatening as an aid to survival, while using less brain power and memory space focusing on and recalling and dwelling on happy or pleasurable experiences.

2. Compose a gratitude letter.

Some research has shown the positive impact of gratitude-letter writing, which takes the practice a step further. Bartlett often suggests gratitude letter writing to her students. “I ask my students to think of a person who they have not ever thanked, expressed gratitude to, or have not for a long time,” she said, “and then to write them a letter.”

Not a text or an email, but a physical letter that they deliver by mail or in person. “It’s very interpersonal in nature. And again, thinking in terms of loneliness, that’s a lovely social connec-

tion that just happened,” Bartlett said.

3. Be willing to experiment and practice.

Everyone’s experience incorporating gratitude into their lives varies, Fox said, and setting up a successful practice will come down to willingness to experiment and practice.

“I really do think of gratitude as being like a muscle in that the more we practice, the more we become connected to gratitude’s transformative benefits,” he said. “And at the beginning it may require a lot more effort than at the end.”

4. Stick with your practice, but also treat yourself with kindness.

Fox, who helps people starting or running large businesses use gratitude to combat stress and loneliness, said people often enthusiastically begin a gratitude practice only to hit a wall a couple of weeks later.

Sticking with it is important, he said, but treat yourself with kindness as you develop that skill.

“A lot of it has to do with our self-talk, telling ourselves sincerely, ‘I don’t have to be perfectly grateful all the time.’ This is not an exercise in perfectionism, it’s really an exercise in just noticing things that are going well,” Fox said. “That’s really the place to start.” ■