

Gratitude Theory

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Researchers find the virtues of gratitude include good health.

In recent years, many scientists have begun examining the links between religion and good health, both physical and mental. Now two psychologists are working to unlock the puzzle of how faith might promote happiness. Dr. Michael McCollough, of Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, and Dr. Robert Emmons, of the University of California at Davis, say their initial scientific study indicates that gratitude plays a significant role in a person's sense of well-being.

From Cicero to Buddha, many philosophers and spiritual teachers have celebrated gratitude. The world's major religions, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Hindu, prize gratitude as a morally beneficial emotional state that encourages reciprocal kindness. Pastors, priests, parents and grandparents have long extolled the virtues of gratitude, but until recently, scholars have largely ignored it as a subject of scientific inquiry.

McCollough and Emmons were curious about why people involved in their faith seem to have more happiness and a greater sense of well-being than those who aren't and decided to study the connections. After making initial observations and compiling all the previous research on gratitude, they conducted the Research Project on Gratitude and Thanksgiving. The study required several hundred people in three different groups to keep daily diaries. The first group kept a diary of the events that occurred during the day, while the second group recorded their unpleasant experiences. The last group made a daily list of things for which they were grateful.

The results of the study indicated that daily gratitude exercises resulted in higher reported levels of alertness, enthusiasm, determination,

optimism and energy. Additionally, the gratitude group experienced less depression and stress, was more likely to help others, exercised more regularly and made more progress toward personal goals. According to the findings, people who feel grateful are also more likely to feel loved. McCollough and Emmons also noted that gratitude encouraged a positive cycle of reciprocal kindness among people since one act of gratitude encourages another.

McCullough says these results also seem to show that gratitude works independently of faith. Though gratitude is a substantial part of most religions, he says the benefits extend to the general population, regardless of faith or lack thereof. In light of his research, McCullough suggests that anyone can increase their sense of well-being and create positive social effects just from counting their blessings.

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