



Gratitude

The Science of Resilience

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Definition

Most simply, gratitude can be defined as a life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive aspects of life (Wood, et al., 2010). However, many other definitions exist:

- Cognitive definition “an estimate of gain coupled with the judgement that someone else is responsible for that gain (Chen & Kee, 2008, p. 319 cited in Renshaw & Olinger Steeves, 2016, p. 287)
- Emotional definition: “a sense of thankfulness and joy in response to receiving a gift, whether the gift be a tangible benefit from a specific other or a moment of peaceful bliss evoked by natural beauty” (Froh, et al., 2009, p. 554 cited in Renshaw & Olinger Steeves, 2016, p. 287)
- Behavioural definition “a positive response to receiving a benefit” (Froh, Emmons, Card, Bono, & Wilson, 2011, p. 291 cited in Renshaw & Olinger Steeves, 2016, p. 287)
- “As an emotion, gratitude emerges from the realization of being a recipient of underserved benefits or positive outcomes as a result of the actions of another individual” (Emmons and McCullough, 2003 cited in Caleon et al., 2019, p. 303)
- “the appreciation one feels when somebody does something kind or helpful” (Froh et al., 2009, p. 409)

Relationship to Resilience

Gratitude has been linked to subjective and eudemonic well-being, school resilience, and the development and maintenance of positive relationships. These relationships can be a key resource during times of stress and are an example of one of the ways in which gratitude can lead to resilience. Another pathway is through improved coping strategies, such as positively reinterpreting situations and finding opportunities for growth.

In a systematic review, Renshaw and Olinger Steeves (2016) found that gratitude correlates strongly with social integration, future gratitude, optimism, and happiness. Gratitude has also been found to negatively correlate with psychopathology (depression, anxiety, eating disorders) and relate to positive functioning in individuals with PTSD (Wood, et al., 2010).

In Wood et al.’s (2010) scoping review, 12 studies supported the link between gratitude and subjective well-being, composed of mood and life satisfaction. Furthermore, gratitude has been linked to eudemonic well-being (the more objective measures of wellbeing, such as autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, and self-acceptance), albeit in a smaller number of studies. Another emerging area is the relationship between

gratitude and post-traumatic growth (Wood et al., 2010); current research has found a benefit for Vietnam War veterans (Kashdan and Uswatte et al., 2006) and those affected by 9/11 (Peterson & Seligman, 2003).

Much of the research on gratitude has focused on its effect on school success; this relationship has been studied in both Western and Asian populations. Gratitude has been associated with greater levels of protective factors, such as academic interest, extra-curricular activities and family relationships in African-American adolescents (Ma et al., 2013). Froh et al. (2008) found that a gratitude intervention involving counting one's blessings benefited school experience and resilience in grade 6 and 7 students; this study replicated the methods of Emmons and McCullough's (2003) study with undergraduate students. Furthermore, Wood et al. (2008) conducted two longitudinal studies of gratitude interventions in undergraduate students and found that people higher in gratitude became less stressed, less depressed, and perceived higher social support by the end of their first term. The authors thus suggest that "gratitude may confer resilience in a period of life transition" (Wood et al., 2010, p. 897). Thus, gratitude benefits not only school achievement, but also individual's resilience to the stresses associated with school.

These results have also been found in Asian populations. Gratitude was a positive predictor of life satisfaction in Chinese elementary school students (Tian et al., 2015), middle school students (Tian et al, 2016) and university students (Sun et al., 2014). Caleon et al. (2019) found that gratitude predicted school resilience and wellbeing in grade 8 and 9 students in Singapore.

Perhaps the most adaptive feature of gratitude, and the proposed mechanism by which gratitude can increase school resilience (Caleon et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2014) and post-traumatic growth (Wood et al., 2010), is the development and maintenance of positive relationships. In Caleon et al.'s (2019) study of gratitude interventions in grade 8 and 9 students, gratitude predicted relatedness with key social partners which mediated much of the relationship between gratitude and school resilience and wellbeing. Froh et al., (2009) found that early adolescents reported greater perceived peer and family support after gratitude interventions.

Two theories help explain the possible connection between gratitude and positive relationships: the moral affect theory (McCullough et al., 2001) and the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 1998; 2004). In the moral affect theory, gratitude operates as a moral affect or emotion whereby people recognize that they are the beneficiaries of prosocial behaviour and this realization motivates them to reciprocate the actions of the benefactor and even do benevolent acts for others in the future. The broaden-and-build theory supposes that gratitude may predispose an individual to notice more of the positive aspects of life, these

positive emotions broaden thought to encourage cognitive and behavioural activities that will build resources, such as positive relationships, that can be utilized during the next stressful period.

Two other theories feature prominently in gratitude research: the schematic hypothesis and the coping hypothesis (Wood et al., 2010). The schematic hypothesis claims that grateful people are more orientated towards higher thankfulness following help due to their cognitive schemas for understanding the world. For example, they may perceive help as most costly to the benefactor, more valuable to them, and the benefactor's intentions as more altruistic. The gratitude and coping hypothesis came from Wood et al.'s (2007) study which found that grateful people were: more likely to seek out and use both instrumental and emotional social support; use coping strategies characterized by approaching and dealing with the problem, such as through coping actively, planning, and positively reinterpreting the situation and trying to find potential for growth; and finally, they were less likely to behaviourally disengage, deny the problem exists, or escape through maladaptive substance use. These coping strategies mediated 51% of the relationship between gratitude and stress. This theory offers a depiction of how people high in gratitude are more likely to cope successfully with stress, through both physiological traits and utilizing resources in their environment, thus exhibiting resilience.

Interventions

In general, as gratitude is understood as an orientation to and appreciation of the positive in life, it can be improved by increasing individual's awareness and evaluation of positive aspects of their own life. Gratitude can be targeted through short moments of reflection (thinking or writing about things which one is grateful for in a global fashion), through behaviour expressions of gratitude (writing gratitude letters, reading them to the recipients), or through a more education-based curriculum meant to increase individual's positive appraisal of benefits (e.g., the Benefit Appraisal Curriculum, Froh et al., 2014).

Counting one's blessings

On of the most used intervention in the literature (Wood et al., 2010). Many participants report a self-reinforcing aspect where they continue the exercise after the end of the intervention. However, attrition is commonly very high as they are often web-delivered and lack human contact. In most of the studies, participants self-selected themselves to the website (cf. Lyubomirsky et al., 2011). In sum, gratitude interventions are shown to be effective at reducing body dissatisfaction and excessive worry (to the same level as clinical techniques, but with a higher retention rate).

Froh et al.'s (2008) study

- Sample: 221 grade 6 and 7 students (mean age = 12.17; SD = .67), 49.8% boys and 40.7% girls (9.5% did not disclose gender), the majority were Caucasian (68.9%). The study took place in the U.S.
- Intervention: participants were asked to list up to five things they were grateful for since yesterday. This was done daily for 2 weeks.
 - Specific instructions: “There are many things in our lives, both large and small, that we might be grateful about. Think back over the past day and write down on the lines below up to five things in your life that you are grateful or thankful for.”
- Results: gratitude induction was related to optimism, overall life satisfaction and improved school experience and residency. However, this was only improved in comparison to the hassle group (intervention: asked to list up to five hassles they had experiences since yesterday) not the control group

Emmons & McCullough’s (2003) studies

- Study 1: 201 undergraduate participants (147 women, 54 men, study took place in the U.S.) completed weekly gratitude diaries for 10 weeks, they were instructed to write up to 10 things they were grateful for. Participants felt better about their lives as a whole and were more optimistic, they reported fewer physical complaints and reported spending significantly more time exercising. There was no effect on global positive or negative affect.
- Study 2: 166 undergraduate participants (125 women, 41 men, study took place in the U.S.) with the same intervention but delivered daily for 16 days. Participants experienced higher levels of positive affect during the 13-day period and were more likely to report prosocial behaviour. No differences were observed in physical symptomatology or health behaviours. The authors suggest this was due to the shorter time frame.
- Study 3: 65 participants with neuromuscular disease (44 women, 21 men, study took place in the U.S.), aged 22 – 77 (mean = 49). Intervention was the same but delivered daily for 21 days. The gratitude manipulation affected subjective life appraisals, increased positive affect, and reduced negative affect. Also, the authors suggest the intervention appears to have improved participants amount of sleep and quality of sleep.

Gratitude letter-writing exercise

This intervention includes variations iterations, such as writing the letter but not sending it, writing the letter and delivering it, and reading the letter to the person.

Froh et al.’s (2009) study

- Sample: n = 89 students from a parochial school (aged 8-19 years, mean = 12.74, SD = 3.48); 50.6% were girls, 49.4% boys; 67.4% were Caucasian, 12.4% Asian American, 9% African American, 9% Hispanic, and 2.2% identified as 'other'. The majority of the sample (74.%) reported that God was "extremely important" in their lives).
- Participants wrote gratitude letters for 10-15 minutes daily for 2 weeks (only on school days) and they were instructed to deliver them (100% of participants reported doing so).
- Results: participants lower in positive affect in the treatment condition showed increases in positive affect and gratitude at post-test and follow-up. However, there was no overall difference in positive affect or gratitude between treatment and control groups.
- Authors suggest that this intervention may be effective for enhancing positive affect in youth but only when considering positive affect as a moderator, that is, those low in positive affect may benefit but not those who already have high positive affect and may experience a "ceiling effect."

Lyubomirsky et al.'s (2011) study

- Sample: 355 undergraduate students, aged 18-46 (mean = 19.66, SD = 2.91), 248 women and 107 men; 40% were of Asian descent, 20% Hispanic, 17% Caucasian, 5% African American, 5% Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander, 6% indicated more than one ethnicity, and 7% reported as 'other'.
- Intervention: students were instructed to spend 15 minutes a week writing a gratitude letter but not delivering it.
 - "Students were instructed to spend 15 min per week remembering times in their lives when they were grateful for something that another person did for them and then writing a letter about those experiences directly to that person (but not sending it). Participants' instructions each week, adapted from Seligman et al. (2005), encouraged them to describe "in specific terms why [they] are grateful to this individual and how the individual's behavior affected [their] life" and "what [they] are doing now and how [they] often remember their efforts." They could write to a new person each week or continue their letter to the same person. Students randomly assigned to compose such "gratitude letters" generally chose to address their letters to a parent, friend, teacher, or other close relative" (p. 395)
- Participants showed improvements in wellbeing immediately and at 6-month follow-up when self-selected into treatment condition.

The Benefit Appraisal Curriculum (Froh et al., 2014)

- Tested with school students aged 8-11. In the first study, the majority were White (68%), from an affluent school district, and 48.4% were boys. In the second study, 80.5% were White, and 54.9% were boys. Both studies took place in the U.S.
- The intervention consisted of structured lesson plans including classroom discussions, writing assignments, and role-playing activities
 - “Students in the treatment condition received instruction on the social-cognitive perceptions that elicit gratitude (i.e., benefit appraisals). Structured lesson plans adhered to the following outline: the introduction (Session 1); understanding a benefactor’s intention behind helping a beneficiary (Session 2); understanding the cost experienced by benefactors when giving a benefit (Session 3); understanding the benefits of receiving a gift bestowed by a benefactor (Session 4); and the review/summary, which incorporated all components of the previous sessions (Session 5). The lessons included classroom discussions, writing assignments, and role-playing activities” (p. 135-136)
 - The social-cognitive perceptions underlying gratitude (value/ benefit, intent, and cost) were measured through vignettes.
 - Also used the Gratitude Adjective Checklist (GAC) (McCullough et al., 2002)
- Showed growth in benefit appraisals and in positive mood over intervention period and at 5-month follow-up

Assessment

The Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6; McCullough et al., 2002; Appendix A)

- 6-item, self-report measure
- Cronbach’s alpha of 0.82
- Originally validated with undergraduate students (aged 19-44; mean = 21)
- Piloted and validated in the U.S.
- Validated with youth (14-19 years old; mostly Caucasian from an affluent district), although authors recommend excluding item 6, alpha < 0.70 (Froh et al., 2011)

The Gratitude Adjectives Checklist (GAC; McCullough et al., 2002; Appendix B)

- 3-item, self-report scale that is the sum of affect adjectives grateful, thankful, and appreciative. Measures gratitude as an emotion.
- Validated with youth (14-19 years old; mostly Caucasian from an affluent district), alpha = 0.70 (Froh et al., 2011)

- Piloted and validated in the U.S.

The Gratitude Resentment Appreciation Test (GRAT; Watkins et al., 2003; Appendix C)

- Piloted with 237 undergraduate students
- 44-item measure; internal consistency alpha = .92
- 3 Factor structure: sense of abundance, simple appreciation, and appreciation of others
- GRAT-Short form also available and validated with university students, alpha = 0.92 (Diessner & Lewis, 2007; Appendix D) Validated in the U.S.

Other Notes

Lyubomirsky et al. (2011) studied how self-selection (motivation) and continued effortful practice affected a gratitude intervention of letter-writing (but not sending) that was web-delivered. The sample was 355 undergraduate students, aged 18 to 46. They found that individuals who selected themselves into the happiness intervention reported the greatest improvement in wellbeing. The amount of effort put into the activities was directly related to improvements in wellbeing. However, the treatment condition overall (including both those who self-selected and those who did not) did not report reliable increases in well-being relative to the control group. Thus, self-selection and effort played a necessary role.

Lyubomirsky and Layous (2013) reviewed the mechanisms of gratitude interventions and found that:

- The timing and concentration of activities matter (e.g., counting one's blessings was less effective at 3 times per week than once per week, but with phone app positive-activity games, the benefits were bigger the more often used)
- Varying the positive activity has shown greater benefit
- Social support increases benefits
 - Perceived social support is also important
- People who are highly extraverted and open to experiences are especially predisposed to benefit from positive activities

Some developmental research suggests that the cognitive skills necessary to understand the social-cognitive determinants of gratitude (intent of and cost to the benefactor and benefit to the beneficiary) only emerge between 7 and 10 years of age (Froh et al. 2009)

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Appendix A: The Gratitude Questionnaire-Six Item Form (GQ-6)

McCullough et al. (2002)

Using the scale below as a guide, write a number beside each statement to indicate how much you agree with it.

1 = strongly disagree

2 = disagree

3 = slightly disagree

4 = neutral

5 = slightly agree

6 = agree

7 = strongly agree

___ 1. I have so much in life to be thankful for.

___ 2. If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list.

___ 3. When I look at the world, I don't see much to be grateful for.*

___ 4. I am grateful to a wide variety of people.

___ 5. As I get older I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events, and situations that have been part of my life history.

___ 6. Long amounts of time can go by before I feel grateful to something or someone.*

*Items 3 and 6 are reverse-scored.

Appendix B: The Gratitude Adjective Checklist (GAC)

McCullough et al. (2002)

Instructions: Think about how you [felt yesterday/have felt during the past few weeks]. Using a scale from 1 (not at all), 2 (a little), 3 (moderately), 4 (quite a bit), to 5 (extremely), please choose a number to indicate your level of feeling the following:

_____ 1. Grateful

_____ 2. Thankful

_____ 3. Appreciative

Scoring: Sum responses to the 3 items.

Appendix C: The Gratitude Resentment and Appreciation Test – Revised

Watkins et al. (2003)

Please provide your honest feelings and beliefs about the following statements which relate to you. There are no right or wrong answers to these statements. We would like to know how much you feel these statements are true or not true of you. Please try to indicate your true feelings and beliefs, as opposed to what you would like to believe. Respond to the following statements by filling in the number that best represents your real feelings in the blank provided next to each statement. Please use the scale provided below, and please choose one number for each statement (i.e. don't circle the space between two numbers).

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
I strongly disagree		I disagree somewhat		I feel neutral about the statement		I mostly agree with the statement		I strongly agree with the statement

1. ___ I couldn't have gotten where I am today without the help of many people.
2. ___ I think that life has been unfair to me.
3. ___ It sure seems like others get a lot more benefits in life than I do.
4. ___ I never seem to get the breaks or chances that other people do.
5. ___ Often I'm just amazed at how beautiful the sunsets are.
6. ___ Life has been good to me.
7. ___ There never seems to be enough to go around and I never seem to get my share.
8. ___ Often I think, "What a privilege it is to be alive."
9. ___ Oftentimes I have been overwhelmed at the beauty of nature.
10. ___ I feel grateful for the education I have received.
11. ___ Many people have given me valuable wisdom throughout my life that has been important to my success.
12. ___ It seems like people have frequently tried to impede my progress.
13. ___ Although I think it's important to feel good about your accomplishments, I think that it's also important to remember
how others have contributed to my success.
14. ___ I really don't think that I've gotten all the good things that I deserve in life.
15. ___ Every Fall I really enjoy watching the leaves change colors.
16. ___ Although I'm basically in control of my life, I can't help but think about all those who have supported me and helped
me along the way.
17. ___ Part of really enjoying something good is being thankful for that thing.

18. ___ Sometimes I find myself overwhelmed by the beauty of a musical piece.
19. ___ I'm basically very thankful for the parenting that was provided to me.
20. ___ I've gotten where I am today because of my own hard work, despite the lack of any help or support.
21. ___ Over the December holidays, the presents I get aren't as good or as many as others seem to get.
22. ___ Sometimes I think, "Why am I so fortunate so as to be born into the family and culture I was born into?"
23. ___ One of my favorite times of the year is Thanksgiving.
24. ___ I believe that I am a very fortunate person.
25. ___ I think that it's important to "Stop and smell the roses."
26. ___ More bad things have happened to me in my life than I deserve.
27. ___ I really enjoy the changing seasons.
28. ___ Because of what I've gone through in my life, I really feel like the world owes me something.
29. ___ I believe that the things in life that are really enjoyable are just as available to me as they are to the very rich.
30. ___ I love to sit and watch the snow fall.
31. ___ I believe that I've had more than my share of bad things come my way.
32. ___ Although I think that I'm morally better than most, I haven't gotten my just reward in life.
33. ___ After eating I often pause and think, "What a wonderful meal."
34. ___ Every spring, I really enjoy seeing the flowers bloom.
35. ___ I think that it's important to pause often to "count my blessings."
36. ___ I think it's important to enjoy the simple things in life.
37. ___ I basically feel like life has ripped me off.
38. ___ I feel deeply appreciative for the things others have done for me in my life.
39. ___ I feel that God, or fate, or destiny, doesn't like me very well.
40. ___ The simple pleasures of life are the best pleasures of life.
41. ___ I love the green of spring.
42. ___ For some reason I never seem to get the advantages that others get.
43. ___ I think it's important to appreciate each day that you are alive.
44. ___ I'm really thankful for friends and family.

Appendix D: The Gratitude Resentment and Appreciation Test – Short Form

Diessner & Lewis (2007)

Please provide your honest feelings and beliefs about the following statements which relate to you. There are no right or wrong answers to these statements. We would like to know how much you feel these statements are true or not true of you. Please try to indicate your true feelings and beliefs, as opposed to what you would like to believe. Respond to the following statements by circling the number that best represents your real feelings. Please use the scale provided below, and please choose one number for each statement (i.e. don't circle the space between two numbers), and record your choice in the blank preceding each statement.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
I strongly disagree		I disagree somewhat		I feel neutral about the statement		I mostly agree with the statement		I strongly agree with the statement

- _____ 1. I couldn't have gotten where I am today without the help of many people.
- _____ 2. Life has been good to me.
- _____ 3. There never seems to be enough to go around and I never seem to get my share.
- _____ 4. Oftentimes I have been overwhelmed at the beauty of nature.
- _____ 5. Although I think it's important to feel good about your accomplishments, I think that it's also important to remember how others have contributed to my accomplishments.
- _____ 6. I really don't think that I've gotten all the good things that I deserve in life.
- _____ 7. Every Fall I really enjoy watching the leaves change colours.
- _____ 8. Although I'm basically in control of my life, I can't help but think about all those who have supported me and helped me along the way.
- _____ 9. I think that it's important to "Stop and smell the roses."
- _____ 10. More bad things have happened to me in my life than I deserve.

_____ 11. Because of what I've gone through in my life, I really feel like the world owes me something.

_____ 12. I think that it's important to pause often to "count my blessings."

_____ 13. I think it's important to enjoy the simple things in life.

_____ 14. I feel deeply appreciative for the things others have done for me in my life.

_____ 15. For some reason I don't seem to get the advantages that others get.

_____ 16. I think it's important to appreciate each day that you are alive.



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