

Shaping a Grateful Brain: How a Gratitude Perspective Changes Our World

Description

At times we all want to change whatâ??s happening around us. Most of the time, we canâ??t. What we *can* do is shift our perspective. We can see the world from a place of gratitude, and that leaves little room for focusing on the things that weigh us down and make us miserable.

Gratitude has been on my mind lately. Part of this might be the arrival of spring. Part of it is the improvement weâ??re seeing in pandemic numbers and the fact that life is getting more â??normalâ?• every day. Also, weâ??re right in the middle of the Gratitude Symposium, which is a month-long series of free virtual presentations meant to thank, teach, and inspire those in healthcare. (It has been a huge success, with more than 60,000 people signing up right away. People are hungry for positivity and gratitude.)

Throughout my life, I have found that when we deliberately come from a place of gratitude, even if our circumstances donâ??t change, the way we perceive them *does.* When we replace negative, stressful thoughts with positive ones about the things weâ??re grateful for, we dramatically change how we experience life. Grateful people are happy people.

I recently came across an article from *Psychology Today* that I thought was so interesting. The author, neuroscientist Alex Korb, PhD, writes about research that shows gratitudeâ??s profound impact on the brain and on our lives. A regular gratitude practice can help us sleep better, exercise more, experience less pain, and be happier in general.

Here are just a few of its insights:

Gratitude influences our behavior. Studies found that people who kept gratitude journals were more optimistic. They also showed increases in determination, attention, enthusiasm, and energy. Thatâ??s not surprising. What is surprising is the regular focus on gratitude actually influenced their behavior. Not only were they happier, they got more exercise.

Grateful people get more sleep, have less depression and anxiety, and feel fewer aches and pains. One study discussed in the article explains why all of this is: Study subjects who showed more gratitude also showed more activity in the hypothalamus (which controls essential bodily functions and influences metabolism and stress levels) and impacted the neurotransmitter dopamine (which makes us feel good and prods us to repeat the thing we just did).

Understand what gratitude is and what gratitude isnâ??t. Gratitude is about appreciating the positive aspects of our situation, NOT focusing on how our life isnâ??t as bad as othersâ??. This insight comes from a study on young people who kept gratitude journals. Those whose journals focused on comparing themselves to others didnâ??t get the same benefits as those who journaled on what they were grateful for.

A grateful disposition can rewire the brain. Gratitude engages our brain in a virtuous cycle. Itâ??s hard to focus on both positive and negative stimuli at the same time, so it makes sense to give our mind lots of gratitude fuel. As Korb writes, â??Once you start seeing things to be grateful for, your brain starts looking for more things to be grateful for.â?•

When we understand how a grateful brain works, weâ??ll see why making gratitude a daily (or even hourly) practice is a smart thing to do. A short-term effort isnâ??t the solution. Instead of going on a â??negativity diet,â?• we need to make a complete lifestyle change around gratitude.

When we look for things to be grateful for every day, when we express it publicly, when we say thank you sincerely and oftenâ??and when we do these things both at work and at homeâ??we train our brain to make gratitude our default setting.

Not only does this change our own life, it changes the lives of those around us. It paves the way for building stronger relationships.

By making the daily decision to focus on what is going right in our life, we naturally focus less on whatâ??s wrong. We spend less time dwelling on the past and worrying about the future. We live in the present, which is where life happens, and where we can make deliberate choices to shape our world for the better.

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