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THE LEARNING BRAIN

Each week in BCPVPA eNews, we share tips, links and self-assessment tools that will help our members to better understand the mental health continuum, and to use the resources that are available.

bcpvpa.bc.ca/thelearningbrain

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GLOWING WITH GRATITUDE

By Rochelle Morandini



WHY IS GRATITUDE IMPORTANT TO MY HEALTH?

The word **gratitude** is derived from the Latin word *gratia*, which means grace, graciousness, or gratefulness. Gratitude is a thankful appreciation for what an individual receives — whether tangible or intangible. With gratitude, people acknowledge the goodness in their lives. In the process, people usually recognize that at least part of the source of that goodness comes from something outside themselves. As a result, gratitude also helps people connect to something larger than themselves as individuals — whether it be to other people, nature, or a higher power.¹

I find it interesting how religious teachings from Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism all encourage people to cultivate gratitude, as it is seen as an important moral virtue. It is an attribute that has been valued for centuries.

¹ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier>

Now, over the past decade, there have been many studies demonstrating that people who consciously count their blessings tend to be happier and less depressed. Other research conclusions show that gratitude not only boosts your mental health but also your overall well-being.

By doing an **MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging)** scan on the brain, researchers were able to prove that gratitude changes the neural structures in the brain and makes us feel happier and more content. Feeling grateful and appreciating others when they do something good for us triggers the 'good' hormones and regulates effective functioning of the immune system. Therefore, like natural Prozac, gratitude can boost the neurotransmitter serotonin and activate the brain stem to produce dopamine.

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When you feel grateful, you experience a synchronized activation of many parts of your brain, which results in positive effects. Scientists have suggested that by activating the reward center of the brain, the way we see the world and ourselves changes for the better.

Researchers also explored how gratitude influences the **hypothalamus**, the region of the brain that controls many essential bodily functions necessary for good health, including sleep, eating, and drinking. The hypothalamus also impacts your stress levels and metabolic rate, which can affect your weight and overall health.

When you experience gratitude, this has a positive effect on the hypothalamus region of the brain, indicating that regular practice of this emotion can help to regulate many behaviors and functions that contribute to your health and well-being.

When your brain releases dopamine, you feel good. It's something you will want to do again. Dopamine also plays a significant role in initiating action, making it more likely that you will repeat the positive behaviors. This can help you engage in many healthy activities that enhance your physical and mental health.²

CHECK OUT THESE RESOURCES!

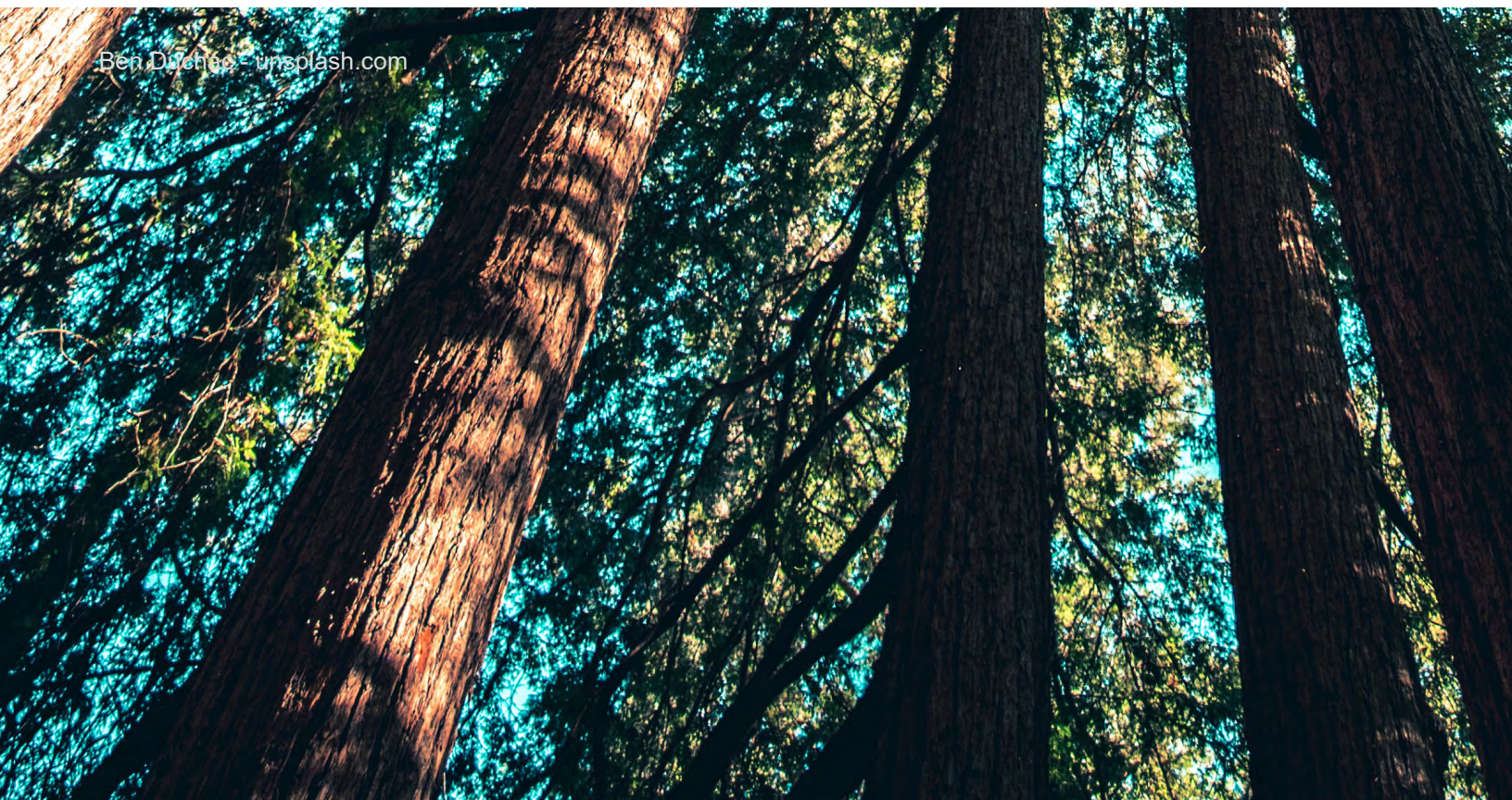
The University of Berkeley has a fair amount of information on this topic. If this is an area of interest to you, [follow this link](#) for more interesting insights on gratitude.

Here is a great [video](#) (under 3 minutes!) on the benefits of gratitude – share with those you love!

Here is a great gratitude experiment you can do on your own, with your family, or even students: [The Gratitude Experiment by WellCast](#)

See, *isn't gratitude amazing?* What's also good to know is that regardless of your personal level of gratitude, it is a quality that you can always nurture and grow.

² <https://medium.com/change-your-mind/how-gratitude-rewires-your-brain-and-how-to-make-it-work-for-you-894e8bf73c59#:~:text=In%20short%2C%20just%20like%20Prozac,brain%2C%20giving%20you%20positive%20effects>



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HOW CAN I PRACTICE GRATITUDE?

There are many ways you can cultivate gratitude on a regular basis.

Many nights before bed, my boys and I name three things we are grateful for in our day. This is a pleasant way to end the day and settle into sleep! Another way I cultivate gratitude is to identify something I am grateful for even in a difficult situation or challenge.



Here are some suggestions to increase your opportunities to practice gratitude followed by some links for additional ideas:

Appreciate everything. Gratitude doesn't have to be saved for the 'big' things in life. The habit of being grateful starts with appreciating every good thing in life and recognizing that there is nothing too small for you to be thankful for.

Write a thank-you note. You can make yourself happier and nurture your relationship with another person by writing a thank-you letter expressing your enjoyment and appreciation of that person's impact on your life. Send it — or better yet — deliver and read it in person, if possible. Make a habit of sending at least one gratitude letter a month. Once in a while, try writing one to yourself.

Thank someone mentally. No time to write? It may help just to think about someone who has done something nice for you, and mentally thank the individual.

Keep a gratitude journal. Make it a habit to write down, or share with a loved one, thoughts about the gifts you've received each day.

Find a gratitude buddy. Find a gratitude buddy for your daily practice – it can be your spouse, your kid, or your friend at work. Set aside some minutes every day where you two (or more if you have more buddies) sit together and discuss the things you are thankful for. Ask questions of each other and open up informally. Sharing thoughts of gratefulness with someone is a great way to sustain motivation and strengthen your emotional skills.

Count your blessings. Pick a time every week to sit down and write about your blessings — reflecting on what went right or what you are grateful for. Sometimes it helps to pick a number of things — such as three to five — that you will identify each week. When writing, be specific and think about the sensations you felt when something good happened to you.

Pray. People who are religious can use prayer to cultivate gratitude.



“Gratitude makes sense of your past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow.”

– Melody Beattie

Meditate. Mindfulness meditation involves focusing on the present moment without judgment. Although people often focus on a word or phrase (such as 'peace'), it is also helpful to focus specifically on what you're grateful for (such as, the warmth of the sun or a pleasant sound).

Volunteer. For many people, the key to having more gratitude is give back to others in their local community. Not only will giving back make you more grateful for the things that you may take for granted, but studies have shown that volunteering for the purpose of helping others increases our own well-being, and thus our ability to be more grateful. ^{3, 4}

³ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/womensmedia/2016/07/08/8-ways-to-have-more-gratitude-every-day/#22929ae21d54>

⁴ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier>

For even more ideas, check out these resources:

<https://albertonrecord.co.za/228790/gratitude-changes-brain/>

<https://positivepsychology.com/neuroscience-of-gratitude/>

“Be thankful for what you have, you’ll end up having more. If you concentrate on what you don’t have, you will never ever have enough.”

– Oprah Winfrey



WHAT OTHER HEALTH TOPICS DO YOU WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT?



Let us know on our Twitter and Instagram this week! Follow **@bcpvpa** to read, engage, share and comment!

Next week

Diversity & Inclusion: Mental Wellness for the Whole Community

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