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Headline: Want a happier and healthier 2024? Practise being thankful, express your gratitude to others

Want a happier and healthier 2024? Practise being thankful, express your gratitude to others



- Practising gratitude is the key to a happier and healthier life
- It also helps one bounce back from adversity
- One mindfulness teacher observed that Singaporeans generally have difficulty expressing gratitude and appreciation for others
- With some practice, it is possible to train the mind to experience and express gratitude more easily over time
- Get tips on how to get started

When disappointment, failure, sadness and loss hit all at once, being grateful, or feeling any positive emotion, may be the last thing on your mind.

Just ask Ms Eva K Peters, who experienced several setbacks in the past year.

Besides having to come to terms with missing out on an award that she had expected to receive, the postgraduate at the Singapore Management University (SMU) was grieving when her grandmother died earlier this year.

What lifted her from the doldrums eventually was when she looked on what had happened through the lens of gratitude.

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“Mind you, I am still not happy about not receiving the award — and that’s okay, and an appropriate emotion to have in this context. I am nonetheless thankful for the insight that I gained about myself and my personal and professional aspirations through failure,” she said, rather than focusing on it being an outcome of her own insufficiency or incompetence.

A Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) candidate in organisational behaviour and human resources whose dissertation centres around mindfulness, Ms Peters started developing this “skill” of being grateful regularly in 2019 after becoming a certified yoga teacher.

Gratitude is a quality one can possess and it can be cultivated by recognising and appreciating the different aspects of life.

“When I began my PhD that focuses on mindfulness, I also read about the beneficial effects of gratitude practice from a research scientific perspective,” she said.

“I think that was an additional motivation for me to incorporate gratitude practices in my life more intentionally.”

So even though Ms Peters cried and mourned the loss of her 93-year-old grandmother, one thing she felt grateful for was the memory of the good times they had together and the years they spent in each other’s company.

She said that gratitude has also helped her to better navigate failures and disappointments.

“I feel that by practising gratitude, we can have a richer experience of life because we can see both the negative and positive sides of all that happens to us.”

WHY IS GRATITUDE IMPORTANT?

There are many proven health benefits to feeling grateful and expressing gratitude. It is the key to a happier and healthier life, and helps one bounce back from adversity.

Professor Jochen Reb, a professor of organisational behaviour and human resources at SMU’s Lee Kong Chian School of Business, said: “Gratitude is a well-researched emotion and it’s clear that experiencing it brings both mental and general health benefits, including positive affect and lower stress.”

He is also the founding director of the Mindfulness Initiative @ SMU, which was started in 2013 to support research in educational and outreach projects on mindfulness, with programmes that are open to the general public and corporate organisations.

Ms Peters said that people who are grateful are generally healthier than those who are not. They also experience less stress, sleep better and have better self-esteem and interpersonal relationships.

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Someone who lacks gratitude may be prone to focus on what’s missing in their life, as opposed to what they already have. This may contribute to a general sense of discontentment, which can negatively affect one’s mental health.

Ms Eva K Peters, a PhD candidate in organisational behaviour and human resources

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Adjunct Associate Professor Angie Chew, founder and chief executive officer of Brahm Centre, a mental health charity dedicated to promoting happier and healthier living, said: “If

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you really have gratitude imbued in you, then you would be a happier person because you don't take things or people for granted."

She is a certified mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) teacher as well as a mindfulness-based cognitive therapy course teacher.

Mindfulness is the awareness of one's internal states and surroundings. To be mindful means to be fully present, aware of where one is and what one is doing at the moment without judging or being overly reactive.

On the flipside, a lack of gratitude can contribute to negative mental health outcomes, Ms Peters said.

For example, there may be more frequent experiences of negative mood, a generally negative mindset, social isolation and increased stress.

"Someone who lacks gratitude may be prone to focus on what's missing in their life, as opposed to what they already have. This may contribute to a general sense of discontentment, which can negatively affect one's mental health," she added.

WHY SOME PEOPLE DON'T FEEL GRATEFUL

In the spectrum of human experience, anyone can be grateful or feel grateful. Prof Reb said that it is "part of our innate emotional repertoire".

However, feeling and expressing the emotion may not come easily to some people.

Culture, family environment and life circumstances play a role.

For example, if the behaviour was not modelled in the family or the environment in which the person grew up, it may be harder for the person to enact it, Ms Peters said.

Elaborating on this, Prof Reb said: "First, we humans learn a lot socially by imitating those around us.

"Thus, when children grow up in families where their parents practice appreciation and expressing gratitude, this will shape them.

"In contrast, when children grow up with a sense of entitlement, they might feel less gratitude."

"Second, and interestingly, some people come to gratitude through adversity. By experiencing or witnessing hardship, they come to appreciate more the little things in life."

There had been research on this, such as a paper published in the Social Psychological and Personality Science journal in 2014, which looked at nearly 15,000 adults and the researchers found that people who had dealt with more adversity or setbacks in the past reported an elevated capacity to appreciate life's simple pleasures.

In Singapore, Adjunct Assoc Prof Chew observed that Singaporeans generally have difficulty expressing gratitude and appreciation for others.

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“We find it difficult because it is not a habit we have developed. I don't think people generally express gratitude as much; even saying ‘thank you’ is not very commonly practised,” she said.

A fast-paced lifestyle can also get in the way of experiencing or showing gratitude.

“In my experience, a key obstacle is our business. We are often too busy working off items on our to-do list, doing chores or chasing our goals to stop and feel grateful,” Prof Reb said.

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We may be rushing from task to task without allowing ourselves to engage with our body sensations, emotions and others. In the long run, (this) may make us appear entitled and ill-mannered.

Ms Chang Ching Chen, a mindfulness-based stress reduction teacher with the Mindfulness Initiative @ SMU

Ms Chang Ching Chen, an MBSR teacher with the Mindfulness Initiative @ SMU, explained that the brain is “wired in a way that makes people tend to go into auto-pilot mode to achieve maximum efficiency”.

She said that it can be difficult to put gratitude into words or practice because that will require one to slow down.

“We may be rushing from task to task without allowing ourselves to engage with our body sensations, emotions and others. In the long run, (this) may make us appear entitled and ill-mannered,” Ms Chang said.

Ms Peters believes another reason could be that people have difficulty connecting to their emotions.

“Today's world is very ‘head-centred’, meaning that we place a lot of value on thinking, reasoning and information processing.

“The fact that so much funding money is going into the creation of businesses powered by artificial intelligence — which one could argue is most related to our cognitive, information-processing version of intelligence rather than emotional intelligence — reflects the value we place on cognition as compared to emotion as a society.”

From a young age, people across the globe are being trained and educated to develop their cognitive skills, Ms Peters added.

"Socio-emotional skills are a focus of education to a much smaller extent, even though this is slowly changing now.

“The point is that our society, globally, I would argue, has not been placing much emphasis on emotions, identifying them, understanding them and expressing them.

"That is one reason why it may be hard for people to feel and, in a second step, show gratitude.”

CAN WE LEARN TO BE GRATEFUL?

The good thing is, it is possible to train the mind to experience and express gratitude more easily, much like improving on a skill or training the muscles to become stronger.

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Ms Peters said: "Experiencing gratitude has a reinforcing effect. In that sense, the more gratitude we are able to experience in a given moment, the more likely we are going to experience more gratitude in the future."

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Words mean something and they evoke a certain feeling. For example, if you complain about something, it evokes a feeling; if you don't complain, then that feeling isn't evoked. Similarly, if you don't say 'thank you', then you don't evoke gratitude.

Adjunct Associate Professor Angie Chew, founder and chief executive officer of Brahm Centre

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Adjunct Assoc Prof Chew pointed out that all habits can be learnt. This applies to gratitude as well.

"For example, just because we paid for something, we feel like we don't have to say 'thank you', we just take it and walk off," she said.

"If we want to cultivate gratitude, that it becomes a habit, then I think we all have to consciously show appreciation."

That means saying a word of thanks to the service provider.

"Words mean something and they evoke a certain feeling. For example, if you complain about something, it evokes a feeling; if you don't complain, then that feeling isn't evoked.

Similarly, if you don't say 'thank you', then you don't evoke gratitude," Adjunct Assoc Prof Chew added.

HOW TO GET STARTED ON HAVING A GRATEFUL MINDSET

With regular practice, feeling and showing gratitude can get easier over time. Here are some tips from the experts.

1. SLOW DOWN

Cultivating gratitude can be hard when one is rushing around to complete tasks.

Before you can count all your blessings, slowing down is necessary. "Pause, take a mindful breath," Ms Chang suggested.

2. THINK OF THINGS TO BE THANKFUL FOR EACH DAY

Next, focus on what you are grateful for.

As part of the mindfulness-based programmes offered at the Mindfulness Initiative @ SMU, participants learn a practice called "three good things", Prof Reb said. This involves bringing to mind three good things that have happened to them.

"This can be little things, such as a cup of coffee, hearing a bird sing or the smile of another person," he said.

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At Brahm Centre, participants are taught the daily “10 finger gratitude practice”, a mindfulness-based cognitive therapy practice that involves recognising that you are grateful for 10 things and people in life. Count them.

Such practices help people to refocus on what they have instead of what they lack.

Adjunct Assoc Prof Chew explained: “The mind, by default, is always looking out for what we lack, is missing, faulty and threats.

“By doing this, it helps the mind not to stay in the default mode.

“We train the mind to be grateful and be in the present, so you don’t keep ruminating about the past, worrying about the future — that’s how you lead a happier life.”

3. ACT ON IT

Besides developing a habit of practising gratitude by bringing to mind the things to be thankful for, Prof Reb suggested a step further: Turn feelings of gratitude into a behaviour by showing appreciation to someone to whom you feel grateful.

For example, tell them how much you appreciate them, he said.

Writing a thoughtful letter to express gratitude is another way to increase feelings of gratitude while letting the other person feel appreciated.

In a study published in the American Psychologist in 2005, writing and delivering a detailed Gratitude Letter showed the positive impact on happiness one month later.

Study participants who personally delivered and read the letter to the recipient, rather than just mailing it, reaped the greatest benefits.

HOW TO BE GRATEFUL IN HURTFUL CIRCUMSTANCES?

It may be tough but it is possible to still find moments to be grateful for even when facing severe hurt or betrayal.

“Cultivating gratitude is not about suppressing or trying to replace negative emotions,” Ms Peters said.

“It also does not mean that one negates the pain or finds a way to justify the hurtful actions or events.

“Rather, it is about allowing oneself to experience gratitude alongside the negative emotions associated with the event.”

It must be emphasised that feelings of gratitude should not be forced.

Prof Reb said: “You don’t need to feel obligated or force yourself to feel grateful towards someone or something that hurt you.

“Instead, you could feel grateful towards things that helped you through difficult times, such as the presence of family and friends, your own resilience.

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“When you are ready, you could consider practising another emotion that has shown to have health benefits — forgiveness.

“But again, you need not force it.”

What about dealing with another person’s entitled and ungrateful behaviour?

Adjunct Assoc Prof Chew has this advice: Accept it.

“Acceptance is what you can do because it’s not up to us to go and change other people,” she said.

Prof Reb said that there is little direct control over other people’s emotions.

“If we require someone to be grateful, quite likely it will not be an authentic feeling of gratitude, just an act.

“Instead we can focus on ourselves by setting a good example. When others see that feeling grateful makes us happy, they might imitate us,” he said.