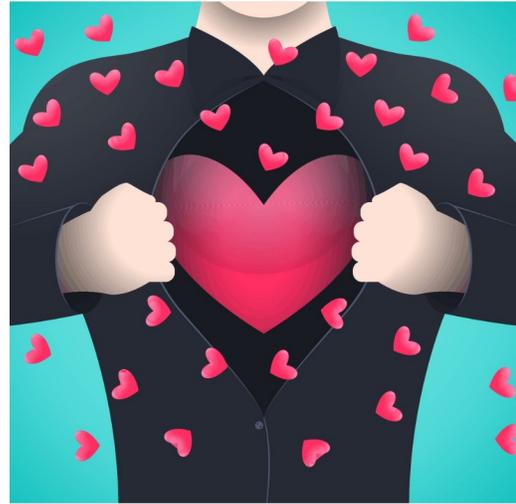


*Helping Us Live Mentally Healthier Lives Since 1933*

*"Gratitude can transform common days into thanksgivings, turn routine jobs into joy, and change ordinary opportunities into blessings."*

*William Arthur Ward*



### **Mental Health Matters: A Monthly Blog Post from the Director**

### **An Attitude of Gratitude: Research Proves That Being Grateful Can Improve Our Mental Health**

A year or so ago, I ran across a TED Talk about happiness and gratitude and which comes first. Are we happy because we are grateful, or are we grateful so we are happy? Listening to the podcast, I came to the conclusion that being grateful is what leads to feeling happy. As we enter into the holiday season with Thanksgiving upon us, I've been looking into this phenomenon and found there is a lot of research validating this point.

While many struggle with major depression, anxiety or feelings of sadness, research suggests that one's spirits can be lifted by expressing gratitude. According to an article from Harvard Medical School, *"Giving Thanks Can Make You Happier,"* gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness. "Gratitude helps people feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve their health, deal with adversity, and build strong relationships."

Ann Morin, psychotherapist and author of *13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do*, states that mentally strong people choose to replace self-pity with gratitude and says that giving thanks can transform our lives. She offers up seven scientifically proven benefits to being grateful:

- **Gratitude opens the door to more relationships.** A 2014 study published in *Emotion* found that thanking a new acquaintance makes them more likely to seek an ongoing relationship. So, whether you thank a stranger for holding the door or send a thank-you note to that colleague who helped you with a project, acknowledging other people's contributions can lead to new

- opportunities.
- **Gratitude improves physical health.** Grateful people experience fewer aches and pains and report feeling healthier than other people, according to a 2012 study published in *Personality and Individual Differences*. Not surprisingly, grateful people are also more likely to take care of their health, exercising more often and are more likely to attend regular check-ups.
  - **Gratitude improves psychological health.** Gratitude reduces a multitude of toxic emotions, from envy and resentment to frustration and regret. Robert Emmons, a leading gratitude researcher, has conducted multiple studies on the link between gratitude and well-being. His research confirms that gratitude effectively increases happiness and reduces depression.
  - **Gratitude enhances empathy and reduces aggression.** Grateful people are more likely to behave in a prosocial manner, even when others behave less kindly, according to a 2012 study by the University of Kentucky.
  - **Grateful people sleep better.** Writing in a gratitude journal improves sleep, according to a 2011 study published in *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*. Spend just 15 minutes jotting down a few grateful sentiments before bed, and you may sleep better and longer.
  - **Gratitude improves self-esteem.** A 2014 study published in the *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* found that gratitude increased athletes' self-esteem, an essential component to optimal performance. Other studies have shown that gratitude reduces social comparisons. Rather than becoming resentful toward people who have more money or better jobs—a major factor in reduced self-esteem—grateful people are able to appreciate other people's accomplishments.
  - **Gratitude increases mental strength.** For years, research has shown gratitude not only reduces stress, but it may also play a major role in overcoming trauma. A 2006 study published in *Behavior Research and Therapy* found that Vietnam War veterans with higher levels of gratitude experienced lower rates of post-traumatic stress disorder.



**Every day we have a choice: we can focus on lack or abundance, choose a state of complaint or thankfulness, or have an attitude of pessimism or an attitude of gratitude.**

According to the article, **14 Health Benefits of Practicing Gratitude According to Science**, here are some suggestions you can do daily or weekly to cultivate an attitude of gratitude:

1. Journal about things, people, or situations for which you are grateful. Consider including negative situations like avoiding an accident, for instance.
2. Think about someone for whom you are grateful.
3. Write a gratitude letter to someone for whom you are thankful. Consider sending it or giving it to them in person.
4. Practice saying "thank you" in a real and meaningful way. Be specific. For example, "Thank you for taking the time to read this article and leave a comment. I enjoy reading your contributions because they broaden my understanding of this subject."
5. Write thank-you notes. Some might say this is a lost art. Challenge yourself to write one handwritten note every week for one month.
6. Focus on the good that others have done on your behalf.
7. Actions lead to gratitude. Smile, say thank you, and write gratitude letters.
8. Give something up. We tend to adapt to newness; sometimes it's a good idea to give something up so that we can increase our appreciation of it.

It may seem simplistic to say that being grateful can make us happier. Many are struggling with day-to-day challenges that can seem insurmountable at times, but if we do make gratitude a part of our daily lives, we can cultivate a mindset that can improve our mental and physical state. Albert Einstein said: "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."

As we go into the holiday season, send a note to someone you haven't touched base with in a while, lend a hand to a stranger who may be struggling, ask a colleague how they are and *really listen*, give to your favorite charity ([donate to MHA now](#)) or volunteer to help someone who is living with a chronic mental health issue ([learn about MHA's Compeer volunteer role](#)).

**We lift our selves up by lifting others. Happy Holidays!**



**How do you practice gratitude?  
Share with us things that have been successful for you so that others may learn.  
I am grateful for your feedback!**

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Mental Health America of Central Carolinas promotes mental wellness through advocacy, prevention and education in Mecklenburg and Cabarrus Counties.



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