



A Word About Gratitude and it's Impact on Your Health

~Dr. Nicola Dehlinger

It may be a theme that is we commonly see this time of year, yet I think talking about gratitude can never be over done. Especially when we sit down and think about the myriad positive influences it can have not only on our mental outlook, but on our physiology as well. There is a growing body of research-driven evidence demonstrating physical and psychological improvements when people choose to engage more readily with what has been described as the most neglected emotion – gratitude.

Recent research has established that the heart is a *sensory* organ and a sophisticated information processing center, with an extensive intrinsic nervous system sufficiently sophisticated to qualify as a “heart brain.” The heart can learn, remember, and make functional decisions independent of the brain. There is also evidence to support that the heart helps to directly generate emotional experience, suggesting that the heart is literally and figuratively the emotional center. That could explain the fact that when we experience the feeling of gratitude, specifically, the rhythm pattern of the heart, respiration and blood pressure become more synchronized. There is also more cohesion between the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system and increased parasympathetic (relaxation) response.

Other research shows that when people keep a short journal of things they are grateful for, they not only report feeling happier (as do their loved ones), but they have fewer health complaints and exercise more! Other benefits demonstrated in studies include increased goodwill toward others, increased hours of sleep (and feeling more refreshed), increased optimism and satisfaction with life, not to mention actively feeling more gratitude! On the flip side, depression is inversely correlated to gratitude. Meaning that if you are feeling grateful, you are less likely to feel depressed – an important reminder for many of us who get down during the holiday season.

Now, most of us don't need a pile of literature to know that when they are grateful for what they have, they feel happier and more connected to those around them. So why do we rarely sustain such regenerative feelings in the midst of our day-to-day lives?

Turns out it's a vicious cycle, and many of us sincerely do not know how to make the switch.

If we do not make conscious efforts to build and sustain positive perceptions and emotions, we are much more likely to feel irritation, worry, judgment, self-doubt, and blame. And this becomes the road most traveled, reinforcing negative patterns into our neural architecture, becoming more and more automatic. Many people do not realize the extent to which these habitual response patterns dominate their internal landscape, eventually becoming so familiar that they become engrained in their sense of self-identity.

But wait! There is good news. Appreciation is one of the most concrete and easiest of the positive emotions for individuals to self-induce and sustain for longer periods. And I have included some simple, concrete ideas for you to use to build a more fulfilling life, today. You literally have the power to change your world because how you choose to experience the world contributes your reality.

- 1) At the end of each day, jot down a few things you are grateful for. They can be simple or profound.
- 2) Tell someone important in your life something that you appreciate about them each day.
- 3) When you look in the mirror, bring to mind something that you appreciate or like about yourself. Don't be afraid to give yourself props!
- 4) Try the Freeze Frame technique to reset your outlook in the moment (see instructions below).
- 5) If you are struggling coming up with something you're grateful for, remember that each breath is a gift.
- 6) Choose a "gratitude buddy" to email with daily – exchange 3 things that you are grateful for. My sister and I have been doing this for years and it serves as a great reminder to me and a way to stay connected with her.
- 7) Be of service to someone else.

The Steps of Freeze-Frame: (from the innovators at HeartMath)

1. Take a time-out so that you can temporarily disengage from your thoughts and feelings—especially stressful ones.
2. Shift your focus of attention to the area around your heart—now feel your breath coming in through your heart and out through your solar plexus. (Try practicing a few times to ease into the technique)
3. Make a sincere effort to activate a positive feeling (this can be a genuine feeling of appreciation or care for someone, some place or something in your life.)
4. Ask yourself what would be an efficient, effective attitude or action that would balance and de-stress your system
5. Quietly sense any change in perception or feeling and sustain it as long as you can. (Heart perceptions are often subtle. They gently suggest effective solutions that would be best for you and all concerned.)

