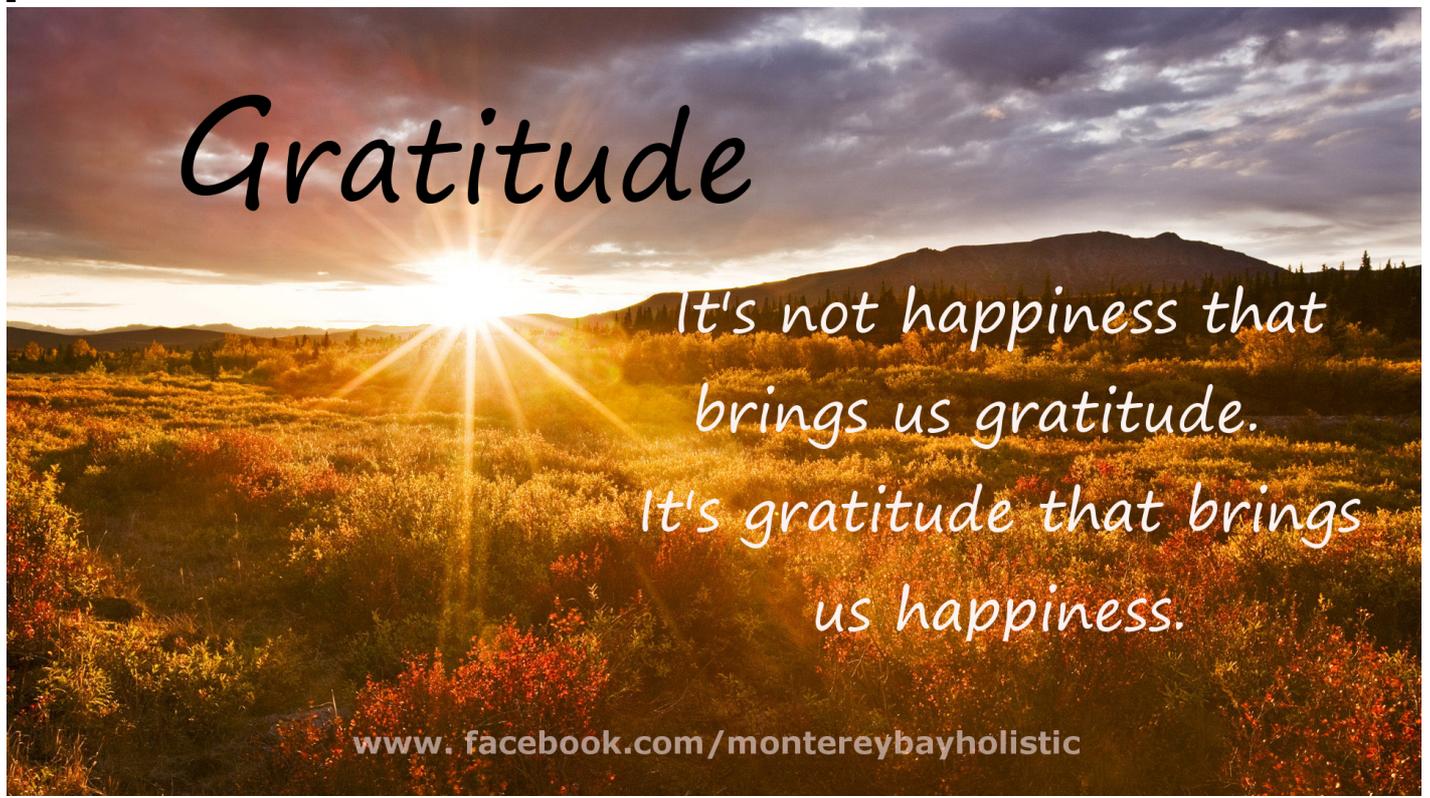


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# Education and gratitude



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**"If the only prayer you said in your whole life was, 'thank you,' that would suffice."** – Meister Eckhart

## 1. What is Gratitude?

Gratitude is traditionally thought of as the act of being thankful or appreciative for a benefit one will receive or has received, with distinct origins in religion, history and culture. Robert Emmons describes it as “an affirmation of goodness. We affirm that there are good things in the world, gifts and benefits we’ve received. We recognise that the sources of this goodness are outside of ourselves. ... We acknowledge that other people—or even higher powers, if you’re of a spiritual mindset—gave us many gifts, big and small, to help us achieve the goodness in our lives.” Whilst sociologist Georg Simmel deemed it “the moral memory of mankind.” The psychological study of gratitude has developed alongside the movement of Positive Psychology, which began in 1998 with Martin Seligman. It was during this time that a cry for the study of normal human functioning was called for; rather than the traditional abnormal psychology focuses. The furthering of gratitude as a branch of Psychology sees it being described in various contexts, as an **emotional expression**, **an affective trait** or an **emotional state**.

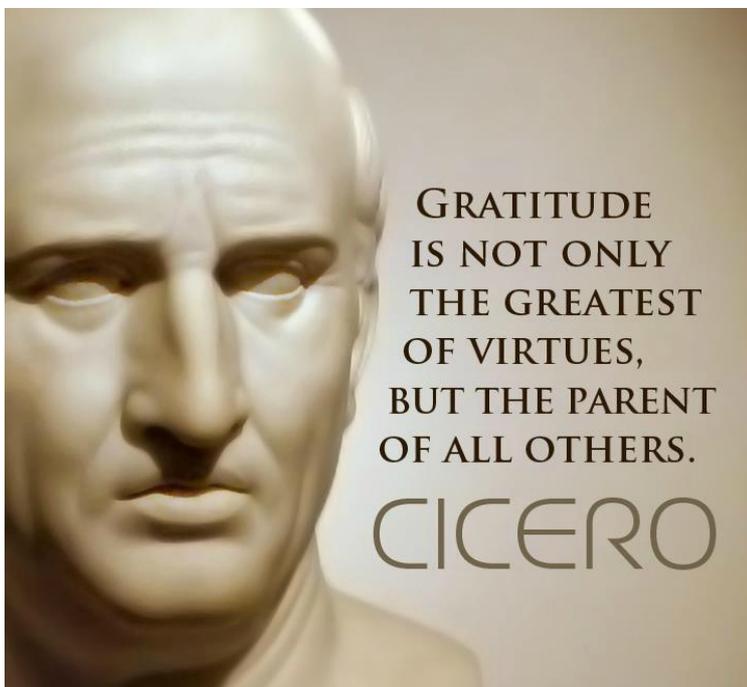
As an **emotional expression**, gratitude is experienced when someone feels that something good has happened to them, and are able to recognize that another person is the source of this benefit (Watkins, 2007). It is argued to be both highly moral and pro-social, and when expressed has the potential to affect ratings of life satisfaction and overall wellbeing (Emmons & McCullough, 2004).

As an **affective trait** it is often referred to as a “grateful disposition”. Those with such a disposition are said to recognize and respond with grateful emotion to the kindness of others and the positivity they obtain from that (McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang, 2002). Someone who scores highly in the affective trait of gratitude is likely to find it easy to experience gratitude and would do so often.

As an **emotional state**, gratitude is less salient than as an affective trait. Those who do not have such a “grateful disposition” seem to need the experience of specific benefits for the elevation of a grateful mood. For those in this situation, gratitude changes alongside mood. However, for those who experience gratitude as more than an emotional state, it is not based on more general benefits, and is not time limited.

## 2. History of Gratitude

Throughout history, gratitude has been commented upon as of great importance both morally and socially. It has been believed to motivate compassion and positive social exchanges; making it influential for improved wellbeing and life satisfaction (Emmons, McCullough & Tsang, 2003). As far back as 54 BC Cicero (Pro Plancio) recognized the importance of gratitude. He stated, “*Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others*”.



Gratitude was introduced as central to the fulfillment of a wholesome, happy life, long before the movement of Positive Psychology. Back in 1759, in his book “*The theory of moral sentiments*”, Adam Smith wrote of his belief in Gratitude as a crucial antidote to self-interest, and that by means of gratitude

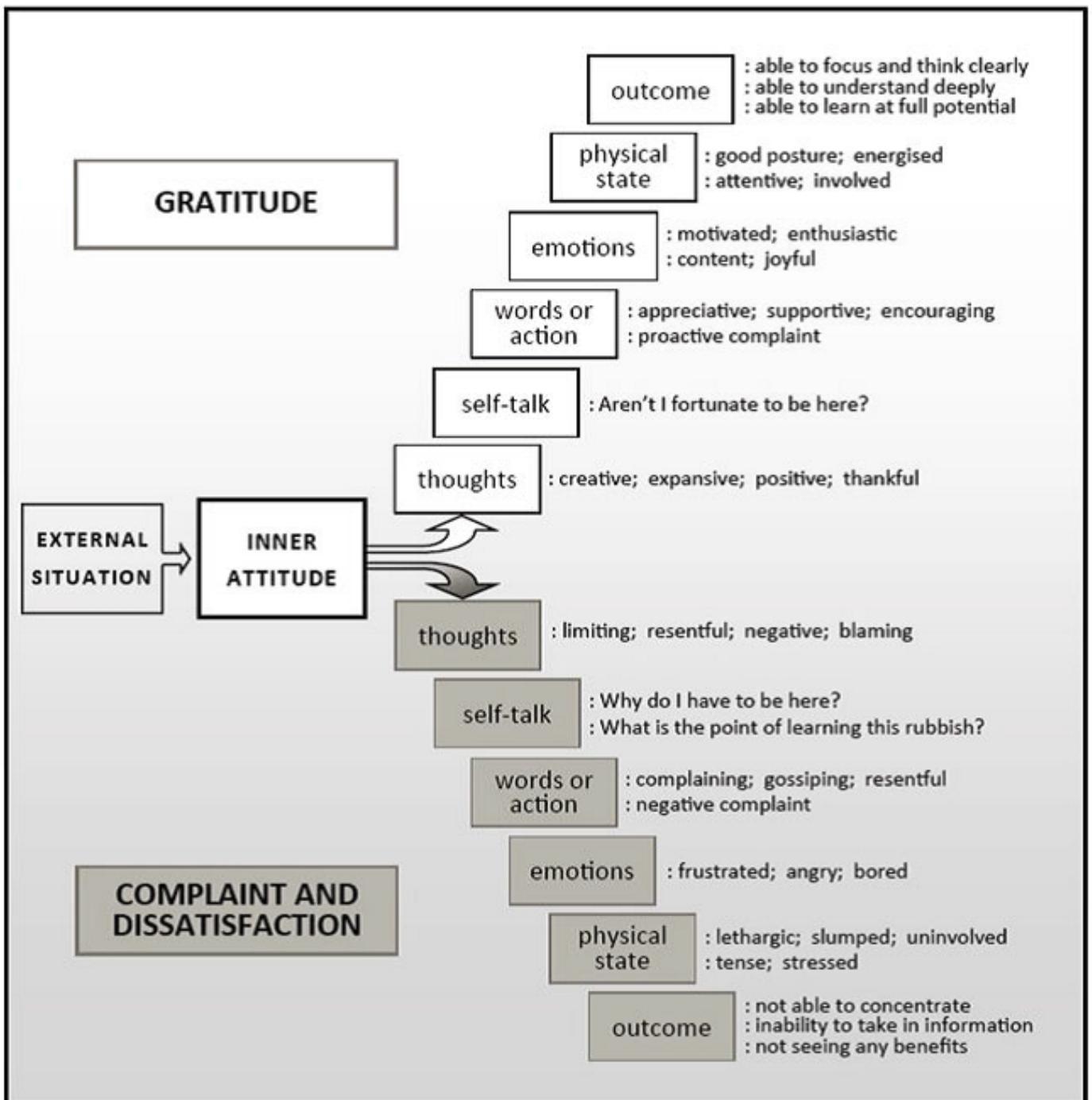
healthy political economies would prosper. More recently, and in greater connection to the Positive Psychology movement, G.K. Chesterton, an English writer, wrote early C20<sup>th</sup> about gratitude as the source of human happiness.

Before being considered as a psychological concept, gratitude first was studied in the realms of theology. The theological origins consider the basis of gratitude in traditional religions, such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, each of which outline gratitude as a virtue to be cultivated, and prescribe means of practicing it.

## **3. Gratitude in Education**

**Dr. Kerry Howells explaining why Gratitude is important to education:**

Flow chart of how gratitude positively enhances a learning environment:



Gratitude as an emotion is seen as a particularly positive one that has the potential to spiral into further positive emotions (Howells, 2012). However, it is believed to be most powerful when expressed or directed towards another person. This is then called the “**practice of gratitude**”. In the context of education, it can be expressed through a process of giving and receiving. For example, students are aware of what they receive from their teachers, awareness of this leads to a sense of gratitude for it, and teachers then receive this gratitude.

When in a positive mood, people are more likely to be attentive, creative and holistic in thinking. This is why there is thought to be a link between thanking and thinking “**when students thank while they think, they think better**” (Howells, 2012). This idea proposed therefore that grateful students will not only be happier, but will also be better learners. The above diagram explains how this process works.

For an effective educational environment, there needs to first be a reduction in resentment, and then an increase in gratitude. Based upon the statement that “*where there is resentment, gratitude can't live and*

*where there is gratitude, resentment can't live*" (Roberts). And therefore, the first step toward more attentive students is to teach them to control their resentment.

*"Resentment and gratitude cannot coexist, since resentment blocks the perception and experience of life as a gift. My resentment tells me that I don't receive what I deserve. It always manifests itself in envy."* – Henri J.M. Nouwen

For this to occur, the importance of teachers and parents controlling their own resentment is emphasised. As Howells explains, this is a radical approach as there is an obvious lack of this in education which is believed to be rife with complaints. Especially considering the low scores of gratitude found in teachers.

### **"Before we can expect students to practise gratitude, teachers need to be practising"**

Often, students see teachers as a means of knowledge requirement, that their passing of knowledge is a fulfilment of expectation, and they are "taken for granted", critically if this expectation is not perceived as being met, it leads to growth in resentment. This in turn hinders learning, academic achievement and determination to achieve (Kristiansen et al., 2012). Comparatively, children that practice gratitude have more positive attitudes towards learning (Froh, Sefick & Emmons, 2008) .

These issues in education extend beyond schooling. There is a lack of gratitude practised in University contexts, and has been shown in teachers, students, deans, vice chancellors and administrators, which potentially undermines creation of cohesion that is essential to the enrichment of educational communities (Howells, 2004).

## **3.1 Social Integration and Gratitude:**

Froh, Bono and Emmons (2010) later found evidence of a reciprocal relationship between gratitude and social integration, whereby gratitude enhances social integration, but social integration promotes gratitude as well. Thus, these authors identified an upward spiral that may be important when considering the well-being of early adolescents.

# **4. Teaching Gratitude**

## **4.1. Why should we teach Gratitude**

**"Gratitude is the most passionate transformative force in the cosmos"** (Breathnach, 1996).

**"Experiencing gratitude does not come naturally, it is a learned process and sometimes an effortful one, and it requires a certain level of inner reflection and introspection. Gratitude must be practised and cultivated"**

Since gratitude is not something which comes to us instinctually, it is important that from a young age children experience gratitude, and model gratitude behaviours. It **cannot** be taught explicitly: "You must be grateful". In fact, demanding gratitude can make children skeptical of showing gratitude behaviours in the future, as if it is not truly felt, it cannot be truly expressed. Rather, **teachers must PRACTICE gratitude**, and by showing gratitude towards their students, strive to cultivate gratitude rather than demand it.

Recently studies suggest that teaching gratitude is beneficial for children's general well-being and also

Recently, studies suggest that teaching gratitude is beneficial for children's general well-being and also for their attitudes related to schooling and life in general. This is important as a significant number of high-school students report dissatisfaction with their school experiences (Huebender, Drane and Valios, 2000). Froh, Sefick and Emmons (2008) used a sample of school-aged children and provided them with a gratitude induction, whereby they had to count their blessing daily for two weeks. They found that the group practicing gratitude were more optimistic and expressed greater life satisfaction (importantly towards their schooling). The greater satisfaction is promising as satisfaction is related both to academic and social success (Verkuyten and Thiis, 2002). By teaching children the practice of gratitude there are multiple benefits to the child's overall life success and happiness.

## **4.2 How should we teach Gratitude**

<http://www.coolcatteacher.com/5-ways-to-encourage-gratitude/> (<http://www.coolcatteacher.com/5-ways-to-encourage-gratitude/>)

Emmons & McCollough (2003) found that by keeping weekly gratitude journals, people reported feeling more optimistic about their lives, exercised more regularly and felt better about upcoming weeks than compared to those that recorded negative or neutral life events that week. Emmons also found that by writing up gratitude lists over a 2 – month period, people were more likely to make positive progress towards their personal goals.

Adults that have participated in daily self-guided exercises have been found to report higher levels of attentiveness, determination, energy and enthusiasm as well as being more likely to offer emotional support to others . This implies that cognitions related to gratitude are trainable, and that cultivating attention to such cognitions can result in the activation of the trait of gratitude (Watkins, P. C. (2014).)

There are several ways which teachers and parents can cultivate gratitude:

*Modelling of emotional responses:*

Young children are very easily influenced and they copy the behaviour of adults around them. If from a young age they are exposed to thankful, positive and grateful emotions, they will emulate them.

*Reinforcement and punishment of their children's emotional responses*

*Emotion teaching or emotion coaching*

Gratitude has been linked to emotional intelligence and therefore the teaching of delayed gratification is important. When a child has to wait for a reward, they are more appreciative of it, and by fostering appreciation of good things; you cultivate gratitude. This can be done simply in ways such as waiting until Christmas before giving a child a toy, or taking turns in a game with other children.

This can be simplified into two key steps. The first is that one must be taught to recognise the goodness in the gift. If someone cannot see the good, then they cannot be appreciative of what they have. The second is to recognise the goodness in the giver, the efforts of another so that one can receive this good, and that it was not their 'entitlement'. By doing so, one can be grateful for the goodness they have received, and show gratitude towards the individual who gave it to them. (Froh et al., in press

Peterson and Seligman (2004)

**“The absence of gratitude marks those people who are belligerently entitled, who proclaim themselves as self-made men and rugged individuals, who see no need to say please or thank you because, after all, they deserve everything they have”**

## **5. Environments of Gratitude**

### **5.1. Gratitude & Culture**

The importance of Gratitude is visible across cultures and time spans where the expression of gratitude has been considered both fundamental and desirable aspects of human personality and relationships (Emmons & Shelton, 2002). Gratitude is a highly regarded disposition in Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim religions.

The concept of gratitude is apparent in texts, prayer and teaching in the majority of the monotheistic religions of the world (Emmons & Shelton, 2002) where gratitude is thought to be the strongest emotions sought in believers.

A study of American teenagers and adults (Gallop, 1998) found that 90% of respondents had indicated that by making a conscious effort to express gratitude they felt “extremely happy” or “somewhat happy” and Emmons & Crumpler found in 2000 that it leads to a more fulfilling, meaningful and productive life.

There has been a growth in popular culture to explore gratitude and happiness on a personal level. Through the realms of blogs, twitter, facebook, and even instagram, individuals are using the internet to openly express their gratitude for life, and encouraging others to do the same. Examples of this include **“#100happydays”** ( (<http://100happydays.com/>)<http://100happydays.com/> (<http://100happydays.com/>)) and **“The Gratitude Movement”** (<https://www.facebook.com/GratitudeMovement>) (<https://www.facebook.com/GratitudeMovement>)

# CAN YOU BE HAPPY FOR 100 DAYS IN A ROW?

YOU DON'T HAVE TIME FOR THIS, RIGHT?

## **5.2. Gratitude & Gender**

Gratitude is subject to individual differences, which has to be accounted for when considering the study of it. Gender plays a large role in attitudes towards gratitude; whilst women evaluate gratitude more positively and less challenging, men do the opposite. Kashdan et al. (2009) indicate that over a 3 month period where gratitude was continually assessed, women had greater gratitude and therefore felt more satisfied in their needs to belong, coupled with the fact they were more likely to possess grateful dispositions and have greater well-being in their lives. Whereas it was seen in men a general opposite affect to this, whereby **men were less likely to feel and express gratitude**, would make more critical evaluations of gratitude (such as receiving gifts) and derived fewer benefits over all.

Therefore, it is suggestive that **gender is a potential barrier in gratitude as men and women express and view it differently**. When looking at gratitude in educational settings, gender should be taken into account due to the perhaps negative connotations males associate with it. Also, it would be interesting to see if these types of results are socially imposed, through males and females navigating the social world differently, and therefore perhaps teaching gratitude from a very young age may negate gender differences at the source.



# **6. Why is gratitude good?**

There have been a multitude of studies over the past decade documenting the **social, physical and psychological benefits** of gratitude. The benefits are diverse and generally available to anyone who practices gratitude; based upon research a quick overview indicates these benefits:

**Gratitude brings us happiness**

**Gratitude reduces anxiety and depression**

**Gratitude is good for our physical health**

**Grateful people have better sleep**

**Gratitude makes us more resilient**

**Gratitude strengthens our relationships**

**Gratitude promotes forgiveness**

**Gratitude promotes us to be more helpful, altruistic and compassionate**

Having a grateful outlook on life is believed to lead to **greater happiness, physical and mental health, peace of mind and more meaningful and satisfying relationships with others** (Emmons & Shelton, 2002; Fredrickson, 2004).

Maslow highlighted the importance of gratitude where the sense of wonder and appreciation for life was one of his core characteristics of self-actualised individuals. He believed an individual's ability to express and receive gratitude was vital for emotional health. He also believed suffering and misery were a

consequence of ingratitude (Emmons & Shelton, 2002).

## 7. Empirical Research

Research into gratitude has risen substantially, with many different branches. The breadth of the research spans topics from problems in modern day society, to psychopathological issues, to education, indicating that in all of the different areas of life where well-being may be in jeopardy, the adoption of a grateful mind-set will be of benefit, at least in the short-term practice. Further research needs to be carried out on the longevity of these effects, and also on the practicality of using these types of interventions or practices in ones everyday life.



### 7.1. Interventions and Applications:

Studies have indicated that **the use of gratitude interventions can elevate levels of happiness and lower levels of stress and depression in people**. For example, in a study on gratitude as an application, participants were assigned to one of six therapeutic intervention conditions that were supposed to improve their quality of life (Seligman, Steen, Park and Peterson, 2005). They found that the “gratitude visit”, where participants wrote and delivered a letter of gratitude to someone in their life gave the best short-term effects, with happiness scores rising by 10 percent, and depression scores falling, with these reports indicating the feelings lasted up to one month after the visit. Also, it was seen that the “gratitude journals”, whereby participants were asked to write down three things they were grateful for each day, produced the best long lasting effects. This condition showed participants’ happiness scores increasing continually each time they were tested after the experiment, with the greatest benefits being found six months after the start of the treatment. These results indicate that **gratitude is significant in increasing peoples’ happiness, and also alleviating depression whilst practicing it**. Similar results indicating that gratitude can be used as an application in a multitude of cases to elevate happiness and alleviate depression can be seen in studies such as, Emmons and McCullough (2003) and Lybomirsky et al. (2005).

As indicated above, the study conducted by Emmons and McCullough (2003) showed that in three different studies using different gratitude techniques, there does seem to be benefits when one regularly focuses on their ‘blessings’. The first study indicated that a weekly benefit listing intervention was associated with participants having a more positive outlook on their lives. doing more exercise. and they

were reporting fewer physical symptoms. The second study indicated that self-guided daily gratitude exercises were associated with higher levels of positive affect. Also participants were more likely to report having helped someone with a personal problem or offered emotional support. The third study indicated that in a sample of adults with neuromuscular disease, random assignment to **gratitude interventions lead to greater levels of positive affect, more sleep, better sleep quality, and greater optimism and a sense of connectedness to others.**

A further example of the application of gratitude intervention is the case study carried out by Morishita (2000) which detailed a 32 year old female who was hospitalised for Anorexia Nervosa and was treated with Naikan Therapy. This is a type of psychological therapy which consists of meditation with a sense of self-reproach and self-reflection, so that the patient develops a sense of guilt and gratitude. The female patient reflected on themes involving her mother, her attitude to others and important relationships in her life during her meditation sessions. After completing three months of Naikan therapy, the female's weight had risen and her eating behaviour and mood disorder had improved. This highlights that **gratitude and mindfulness interventions can be used in complex psychological disorders**, with successful outcomes.



## **7.2. Associations with Well-Being:**

In a comprehensive review of gratitude and well-being, Wood, Froh and Geraghty (2010), highlighted that **gratitude is linked to a variety of clinically relevant phenomena**, including Psychopathology (particularly depression), adaptive personality characteristics, positive social relationships, and physical health (particularly stress and sleep). They proposed that even though the relationships may be unique, gratitude could explain the variance in the outcome after controlling for fifty of the most studied traits in Psychology, indicating that gratitude may genuinely be able to add a new contribution to the literature.

This review portrays how successful the empirical research has been in providing some reliable evidence that gratitude can have an effect on peoples' well-being, and that it can be considered as part of therapeutic techniques for clinical and non-clinical populations alike in promoting all round well-being and "happiness".

Other avenues of empirical research in gratitude have suggested that it can negate modern societies

Other avenues of empirical research in gratitude have suggested that it can negate modern societies reliance on superfluous things, which create unhappiness, such as materialism (Polak and McCullough, 2006). Fostering gratitude can alleviate such materialist striving, which has come to be pervasive in modern society as a persistent emphasis on lower order needs as a means of comfort and control. It is argued that materialism creates a conflict in values, which leads to psychological tension and therefore hinders well-being (Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002). Thereby, adopting **gratitude techniques can counteract the negative effects that materialism presents.**



There haven't been many models developed that could suggest why those practicing gratitude techniques generally reap elevated levels of well-being compared to those who are not. Fredrickson (1998; 2002) suggested a broad model which could perhaps lay some foundations for what is actually happening in these studies and why. She claimed that **gratitude is an upward spiral** in that positive emotions can be used in times of need; it builds personal resources and broadens mind-sets. Therefore, in subsequent studies this model can be used to explain why those who practice gratitude are more pro-social, create stronger friendships and bonds, and in times of need can facilitate them to cope with stress and adversity. This model is very general in a sense of just suggesting that positive emotions broadens and builds upon all current emotions/relationships/resources/cognitions that people have, to be used as needed. Further research needs to explore different types of models and perhaps more specific underpinnings of what is actually happening when we practice gratitude and why.

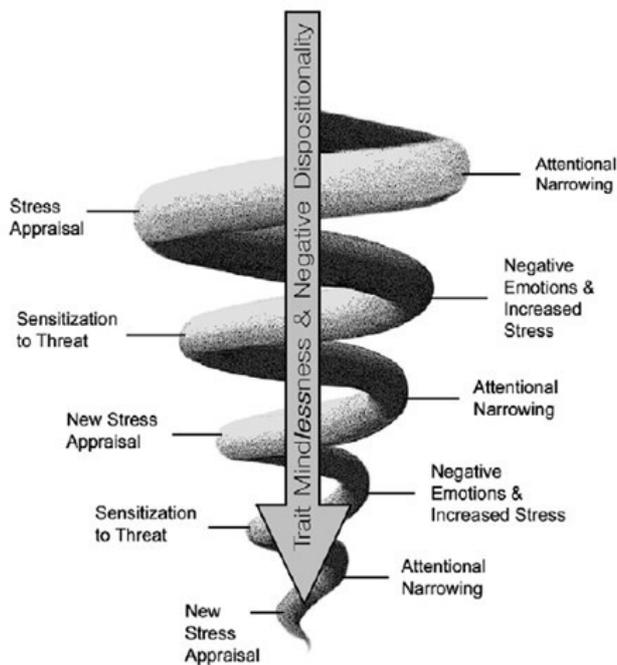


Fig. 1. Downward spiral of psychopathology (Garland, 2010).

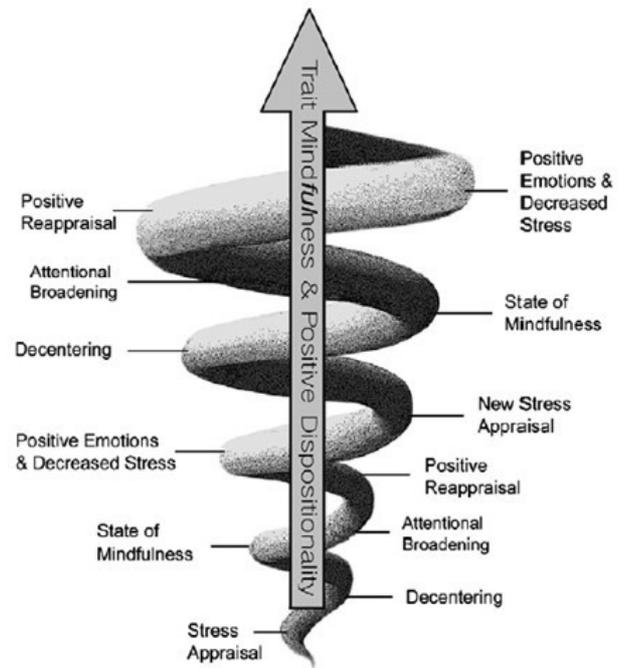


Fig. 2. Upward spiral of flourishing (Garland, 2010).

## 8. Limitations

Theoretically it would seem, following the paths outlined by Kerry Howell's research that fostering an environment of Gratitude will be of great benefit to both students and teachers, however, Benton (2010) points out an interesting challenge when we consider how the academic amongst us think.

Education and academia teach us to challenge things. Higher education students are taught to criticize, to look for solutions, to enhance, further and expand the givens that surround us. Critical thinking is considered a great attribute in western culture, and Benton believes this is often what holds us back from feeling true gratitude.

Gratitude can be seen as being content, appreciative and accepting of our surroundings. Yet we are taught to be critical and search for improvement, which suggests it is hard for the two to go hand in hand, and that academia in fact fosters a culture of ingratitude, albeit indirectly.

Another challenge would be to question how long does this adoption of gratitude last for? Most of the studies look into short-term effects of a gratitude intervention over periods of weeks or months, but we do not know what effect it will have over years. If we teach children to be grateful, will they presumably be grateful for the rest of their lives, or is it something that has to be consciously thought about to maintain the benefits from it.

A further limitation within the Gratitude literature, highlighted by Froh, Sefick and Emmons (2010), is that many of the studies purport that Gratitude interventions are effective, but in comparison to what? Many studies use a control group who do not receive gratitude interventions, and instead may complete tasks such as listing five hassles, or writing about what happened to them that day, or writing about the layout of their room; versus similar interventions based on what that person was grateful for. These control groups are deemed to be in essence psychologically 'inert' on the dependant variable measure, i.e., Well-being . However, can anyone be true psychologically 'inert'; the nature of perhaps expecting something to change, may cause psychological change itself, which would cause unreliable results in these studies. Furthermore, how can it be said that the expectancies of those in gratitude interventions

are equal to those in non-gratitude interventions? It is unclear if the control group will be producing equal expectancy effects of something changing by completing the intervention. Therefore, studies using such 'control groups' who receive a psychological placebo type experience, may not be providing the most accurate comparison, so the successes of gratitude interventions may not be as profound as once thought. Perhaps, in light of these limitations the research should consider using 'no-intervention' groups as controls, so it can be said with more conviction that practicing gratitude is better than nothing. Similarly, when using a control group, the expectancy effects should be fairly equal, through using identical therapies and eventually removing components from one therapy to isolate the component which is actually having an effect.

### **8.1. Issues with Gratitude as an Emotion:**

(Jonas 2012)

It's important to recognise that gratitude is an **EMOTION** and as such it **cannot be forced**. Teachers (and other educators) cannot demand it of students and expect them to **feel** it immediately. This is a particular issue in modern democratic societies, where there is a culture of resentment and high expectations. Yet, this does not mean gratitude cannot be **encouraged**. By encouraging and cultivating gratitude rather than demanding it, students will be able to experience it in its purest form - they will **FEEL** it.

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