

Gratitude Journal

Gratitude

Intervention

5-10 min.

Client

Yes

Research shows that gratitude can be learned and increased. In a study by McCullough and Emmons (2003), participants completed extensive weekly journals for a period of 10 weeks, in which they rated their mood, physical health and overall life experience. Participants were randomly divided into three groups: one group wrote down five things for which they were grateful every week (the gratitude condition), the second group wrote down weekly hassles (the hassle condition) and the third group listed five events that merely affected them (the events condition). The participants in the events condition, otherwise specified as the control condition, were not told to accentuate the positive or negative aspects of those circumstances.

Results indicated that those in the gratitude condition reported fewer health complaints. More specifically, the gratitude group participants experienced fewer symptoms of physical illness than those in either of the other two groups. In addition, people in the gratitude condition spent significantly more time exercising (nearly 1.5 hours more per week) than those in the hassles condition.

Goal

The goal of this exercise is to increase gratitude by keeping a journal.

Advice

Although being grateful can result in positive effects, it is important to make sure that clients don't use gratitude as a way to avoid or deny the negative things in life. In addition, make sure clients understand that gratitude is not only about "big" things. Drinking a cup of coffee, having a nice conversation, etc. are all good examples of things that one can be grateful for. Sometimes clients interpret the exercise as a way to put things into perspective: "People in Africa are dying, I should be grateful for this mail". Gratitude is not about (downward) comparison. Of course, things can always be worse, but this is not the essence of gratitude. It is possible to be grateful for something without making the comparison to people who are worse off.

It is important to note that research findings on keeping a gratitude journal are mixed. While some studies reveal significant benefits, other studies show that gratitude journals do not always work. Findings suggest that the way the intervention is implemented is critical. For instance, in a study by Lyubomirsky, Tkach and Sheldon (2004) it was found that increases in happiness were only observed for participants who wrote in their gratitude journals once a week for six weeks. Participants who wrote three times per week did not report these increases. Possibly, focusing too much on gratitude can increase adaptation to positive events and may increase numbness to regular sources of goodness in our lives.

Robert Emmons, the leading expert on the science of gratitude, shared these other tips for applying the gratitude journal in the most effective way:

- To more effectively practice gratitude journaling, psychologist Dr. Lyubomirsky recommends consciously choosing to become happier and increasingly grateful before writing each journal entry.
- To increase the benefits of gratitude, focus on one or two things in detail that you are grateful for instead of writing an extensive list.
- One effective way to increase the impact of gratitude is to focus on people for whom you are grateful, instead of material possessions.
- One strategy to stimulate the experience of gratitude is to ponder what life would be like without all that you have, instead of listing all of the people and things for which you are grateful.
- Stronger levels of gratitude stem from remembering and appreciating surprises or unexpected events.



Suggested Readings

Emmons, R. A. & McCullough, M. E. (2003). Counting blessings versus burdens: An experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well being in daily life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, 377-89.

Lyubomirsky, S., Sheldon, K. M., & Schkade, D. (2005). Pursuing happiness: The architecture of sustainable change. *Review of General Psychology*, 9, 111-131.

Lyubomirsky, S., Tkach, C., & Sheldon, K. M. (2004). Pursuing sustained happiness through random acts of kindness and counting one's blessings: Tests of two six-week interventions. Unpublished raw data.

Tool Description

Instructions

There are many things in our lives, both large and small, for which we might be grateful. During this week, list things in your life that you are grateful or thankful for (blessings). Examples may include supportive relationships, contributions that others have made for you, facts about your life such as your advantages and opportunities, or even gratitude for life itself and the world that you live in. You may use the forms below to write about these blessings in your life or you may choose to write in an actual journal of your choosing. Do this exercise once or twice this week.

Date:

Blessings:

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Reflection:

Date:

Blessings:

.....

Reflection:

Date:

Blessings:

Reflection:

Date:

Blessings:

Reflection:

Date:

Blessings:

Reflection: