

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 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 neutral events that barely 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 experiences.

The results indicated that those in the gratitude condition reported fewer health complaints. More specifically, participants in the gratitude group experienced fewer symptoms of physical illness compared to 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) compared to 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 do not use gratitude 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 a coffee or having a nice conversation are all good examples of things that one can be grateful for, among other things. Sometimes, this exercise can help clients put things into perspective, for example, “People in Africa are dying, I should be grateful for this mail.” Gratitude is not about the (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 comparing oneself with 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 of keeping such a journal, other studies show that gratitude journals do not always work. Findings underline the importance of choosing the

right method to implement the intervention. For instance, a study by Lyubomirsky, Tkach, and Sheldon (2004) found that only participants who wrote in their gratitude journals once a week for six weeks experienced increased happiness. Participants who wrote three times per week did not report this increase. 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 additional tips for applying the gratitude journal most effectively:

- To practice gratitude journaling more effectively, 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 for which you are grateful instead of writing an extensive list.
- One effective way to increase the influence 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 the people and things for which you are grateful.
- Stronger levels of gratitude stem from remembering and appreciating surprises or unexpected events.



References

- 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.



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Instructions

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

Date:

Blessings:

Reflection:

Date:

Blessings:

Reflection:



Date:

Blessings:

Reflection:

Date:

Blessings:

Reflection:

Date:

Blessings:

Reflection: