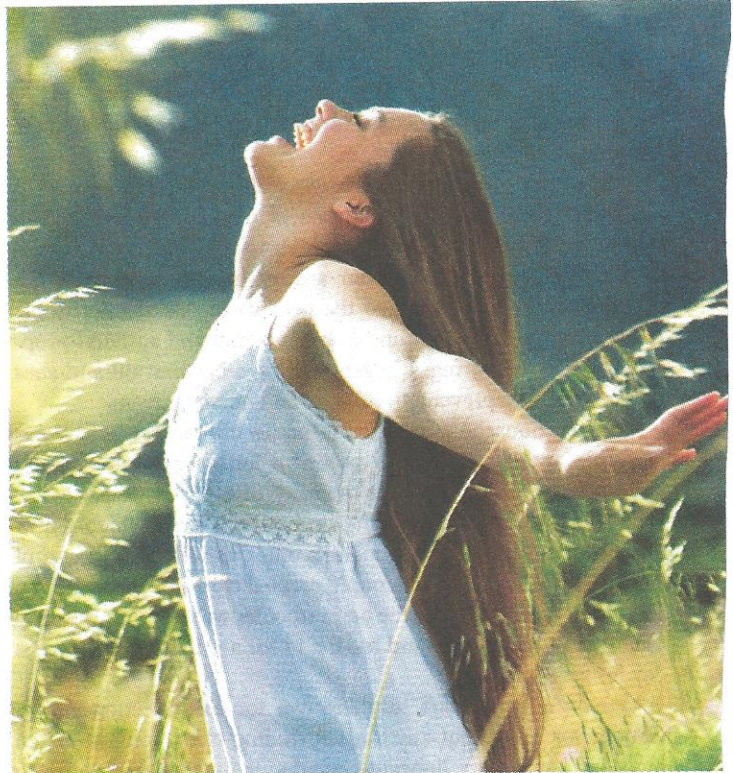


Is gratitude selfish?

By Phyllis Kasper, PhD


What if you knew that gratitude was good for you? Not just part of some far-off theoretical spiritual reward, but suppose it was also good for your brain anatomy and function, your blood pressure, relationships and longevity. Is it selfish to practice gratitude in order to live longer? What if you knew that practicing gratitude could improve your performance at work or school, or in sports, or make you more resilient and better able to cope with stress? What if practicing gratitude didn't cost anything or involve great sweaty time and effort, or meditating in a mountain cave? Would you be selfish if you started to explore the benefits of gratitude? Well guess what, all these benefits of gratitude are real. On the other hand, is it really selfish to take good care of yourself so that you can be helpful to others?

If you like the certainty of seeing the research, go to www.heartmath.org. They have pulled together a lot of studies showing the health benefits of gratitude and appreciation. Their research also shows that it's relatively easy to learn to sustain these positive feelings for long periods. There is great research by psychologist Richard Davidson at our very own UW-Madison. You can learn about his book, "The Emotional Life of Your Brain," at www.richardj davidson.com. You can see the scope of his research on just plain folks as well as advanced meditators like the Dalai Lama at www.psypzhz.psych.wisc.edu.



edu. This year, the Dalai Lama made his ninth visit to Wisconsin to teach compassion and to participate in this research.

If you'd rather skip the technicalities and just get right down to it, the Institute of HeartMath has easy-to-follow instructions. First, take some time for yourself in a quiet place, where you can let go of stressful thoughts and distractions for a while. Then focus your attention to the area of your heart, breathe easily and naturally, and imagine breathing in through your heart and out through your solar plexus. Make a sincere effort to activate a positive feeling, such as gratitude, appreciation or joy. Perhaps you can focus on a happy memory of a person, place or situation. Breathe the good feeling in through your heart, and radiate loving kindness out through your solar plexus. Quietly sense the changes in perception or sensation, and hold the positive feelings as long as you can. As you practice, you will be able to click into this state quickly and use it to take care of your emotions and physical health. Of course, your mind will wander, perhaps even into bad memories and feelings. That's OK; just return to awareness of breathing positive feelings in through your heart and out through your solar plexus.

At first your practice time might take 10-15 minutes, but with experience, five minutes will be more than enough. As you make this part of your daily routine, you will notice that you become calmer and less reactive. You definitely will not sweat the small stuff. You will sleep better, have more energy and concentrate better. The little bit of time the practice takes will more than pay for itself. Try it. Not just once, but daily for at least a week. I think you will enjoy this simple technique and the benefits it brings! 

Dr. Phyllis Kasper has expertise in anxiety disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, peak achievement, biofeedback, hypnosis, EMDR, cultural diversity and pain management. She can help you use personal empowerment to unleash your best you! For more information, please call her at 920.693.2250 or visit www.evolveability.com. She is available at Healthy Connections, 510 E. Wisconsin Ave. in Appleton, 920.257.4601.

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