

The Gratitude Project: Mental Health Benefits

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UC Berkley's Greater Good Science Center is designed to understand the science behind happiness and how people can work to become happier. They even provide a free online course titled, "The Science of Happiness."

- How many of you just did an eye roll or gave your computer screen the side-eye?
- Why would anyone try to apply the scientific process to happiness? It just is or isn't, right?

Think about it this way, the sun is just there at the center of our solar system. Scientists want to know how it works and what it does. Now, scientists are applying those same concepts to happiness – what is it and how does it work.

- How does gratitude fit in with happiness? Why is happiness so important?
- How does one lead to other? And, how does it improve mental health?

I guess we should first take a brief look at happiness and what it is. To be happy is to have a feeling of pleasure or contentment. In my opinion, it's a more deep-seated and serious emotion than the giddy, effervescent emotion that many people associate with the word happy.

Gratitude fits in with happiness by providing a foundation for it to be built on. By creating a focus on gratitude, we have less room for toxic emotions. By practicing gratitude, we allow ourselves to focus on the positive things around us. Brain scans show that people who practice gratitude have greater activity in the prefrontal cortex of their brains. Alternatively, scans showed that people who do not practice gratitude have less activity, *even when expressing gratitude or thankfulness*. The prefrontal cortex has a lot of functions, one of which is emotional control.

There have been several studies on how gratitude helps to improve mental health. One study I thought summed up their findings very well. This study focused on three groups: those who wrote about what they were grateful for, those who wrote about their thoughts and feelings about negative events, and a control group that did not participate in either activity. Their summation was this: the number of positive emotions words used was not a good indicator of improved mental health. It was only those people who used fewer negative emotion words that were more likely to report improvement.

Homework: Next time you go to your doctor, ask for your happiness brain scan. (Kidding!)

Next topic will discuss how to practice gratitude.