

Healing Through Gratitude and Thankfulness

by Rita Milios

November is a month when we intentionally focus on being grateful and remembering the people and situations that induce these feelings in us. But is feeling grateful and appreciative just a transient emotion linked to a season? Or is it instead a powerful mental energy that can be used to help us heal and grow, both personally and spiritually?

Studies by researchers, including those from Indiana University, led by Prathik Kini, who designed a “Pay It Forward” gratitude task and measured results in a brain scanner, found that gratitude is “likely a unique emotion ... akin to empathy or consideration of another’s point of view, but [having] more of a pro-social component.”

They also concluded that “gratitude motivates and reinforces the making of choices that lead to mutually beneficial behaviors for those involved; it also lasts longer and can be trained.” The researchers described this effect as akin to strengthening a “gratitude muscle.”

Identifying What You Are Grateful For in Your Recovery

Recovery is hard. It is easy to focus so much on the struggles you are experiencing and the work you must do to meet the challenges that you forget to notice the opposite perspective—that each day you remain sober, you have more and more to be grateful for. But when you intentionally recall and focus on your successes and the things you have to be grateful for, you give yourself a breather from experiencing *only* the intensity of the work you are doing. You allow yourself to enjoy the relaxation and relief that comes from recognizing and embracing the positive gains you are making.

This mental state reboot is the recovery equivalent of “stopping to smell the roses.” In other words, work hard *and* intermittently take stock of your successes and take time to appreciate and be grateful for them. Every now and then, make a list of the things that have improved in your life since you began your recovery. They may include:

- **Improved health:** Reducing the impact of toxic chemicals in your body by ceasing to use drugs or alcohol is the most important step you take toward improved health when you begin your recovery. In addition, most people begin to pay better attention to their nutritional and exercise needs, and this further improves their health potential.
- **Improved relationships:** When addicted, people do not place appropriate emphasis on their relationships with friends and family; the addiction takes priority. Once freed from the grip of addiction, relationships with friends and family can often be repaired and can once again be a source of love and support.

- ***Improved career or job potential:*** When addicted, you are not able to give your best efforts to your job or career. Symptoms such as irritability, difficulty in maintaining a mental focus, and experiencing emotional conflict can all distract from your potential to do a good job. But once sober, you can refocus on the job at hand with clarity and enthusiasm, and this positive difference will likely fuel your success.
- ***Improved self-esteem:*** A major factor in addiction is the shame and self-blame that most addicts feel when they are using. By getting sober, much of the self-blame can be lessened, and your confidence increased, so that you have a jump-start on building the healthy self-esteem that can secure your continued success in recovery.
- ***Increased self-discipline:*** Many addicts feel helpless in the grip of their addiction habits. But, bit by bit, through working the steps toward recovery, you gain new, positive habits and increased self-discipline, because the proven effectiveness of your new habits propels you forward.
- ***Freedom from guilt and worry:*** A life of addiction is a life of worry—about getting caught, about the personal and professional consequences that addiction brings, as well as worry about your future and your health. Once sober, these worries are no longer the main focus of your life, and you can begin to look forward to a better future.
- ***More serenity and peace in life:*** In addition to the above practical worries, addiction robs you of your spiritual centeredness. It is impossible to feel serenity and peace when you are in the throes of addiction. By getting sober, you can begin to bring this peace and balance back into your life.

The Difference Between Gratitude and Thankfulness

The list above details many of the things that you may be *grateful* for. Experiencing gratitude is a *feeling* that comes from recognition of the fact that you have, in some large or small way, been blessed. You can expand on and show your gratitude by demonstrating *thankfulness*.

Thankfulness is an *expression* of the appreciation you feel. While gratitude is a personal feeling within, thankfulness often involves an action or outward gesture.

Demonstrating Thankfulness

If you feel grateful, you will likely want to demonstrate this feeling to those who helped you or to those who share your relief and happiness for your release from addiction.

By letting your supporters know that you appreciate and are grateful for their support and their confidence in your ability to achieve your goal, you are giving back to them some of the positive feelings that they gave to you.

This exchange is an example of a *virtuous cycle*, where one positive occurrence leads to another and further promotes the originating one, so that the positivity fuels and increases itself in an ongoing manner.

Ways to Demonstrate Your Thankfulness to Supporters

- **Tell them:** Sometimes we expect that others will “just know” how we feel. Even if this is so, it is always nice to be told directly that our assistance was appreciated, and the specific ways in which it made a difference (e.g., when *I called you, and you came to pick me up at the bar, I knew that I wasn’t going to have to do this all alone, and it gave me courage to try harder. I am so grateful for your support and confidence.*)
- **Show them:** Once sober, you are in a position to provide support and assistance to someone who helped you when you were in need. Be alert for ways that you can return the favor of kindness and helpfulness to them. Perhaps you can assist them in a task, or you can vouch for them when asked for your opinion on their work or talents.
- **Prove them right:** Show your supporters that they were right to believe in you. Reward their faith in you by staying the course and making both them and yourself proud.