

Embracing gratitude: health benefits and practical applications

AT A GLANCE

The practice of gratitude has been shown to decrease many negative effects of stress, enhancing physical and psychological well-being.

The Situation

The world is overrun with stressful circumstances. During the span of the COVID-19 crisis, the effects of stress on health entered the spotlight. The medical community affirms that chronic mental and emotional stress contribute significantly to both acute and chronic health conditions. Bombardment with tragic news, adverse world conditions, and personal challenges multiply stress and can significantly compromise psychological and physical well-being.

Our Response

University of Idaho Extension family and consumer sciences associate educator Leslee Blanch created a presentation discussing the benefits and practical applications of embracing gratitude. This program highlights the physical and psychological benefits of adopting a thankful attitude: a decrease in chronic low-grade inflammation; a decrease in experiences of stress, anger, depression, anxiety and insecurity; an increase in experiences of happiness and improved relationships; improved cognitive brain function and mental focus; and improvements in immunity and sleep quality. Research has also shown a protective effect of gratitude in relation to mental health and substance abuse challenges.



Photo courtesy of Google Images.

Practices such as verbalizing or recording one or more things an individual is thankful for each day can bring about positive changes such as those noted above. Asking oneself, "What can I value that I usually take for granted?" or, "How can I express thankfulness to someone else?" are practical ways individuals can develop a habit of gratitude. Practicing gratitude can be an integral part of a healthy self-care plan.

Program Outcomes

Embracing Gratitude was presented to 149 participants in southeastern Idaho. A variety of community groups were reached, including the Department of Corrections and homeless transitional housing residents, developmental program clients and staff, and university and college faculty and staff. Of the 101

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participants who completed a post-survey, 79 (78%) reported a gain in new knowledge and 95 (94%) stated intent for behavioral change. Many participants cited health benefits of practicing gratitude as new knowledge, including a decrease in inflammation and improvements in cognitive function and sleep. The ideas that gratitude can come in many forms and is intentional were stated as new knowledge.

An intended behavioral change stated by many individuals was the practice of counteracting a complaint with acknowledgment of something to be thankful for. Daily expressions of thankfulness verbally or through gratitude journaling were intended by numerous participants as well. Valuing what is usually taken for granted and making a choice to be sincerely thankful were also noted as intended behavioral changes.

The Future

As the presentations on embracing gratitude have been positively received, this educator will continue to offer this program in a variety of venues. The benefits of practicing gratitude are plentiful to those of all ages. This educator will expand the reach of this program to include youth and senior citizen groups.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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