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Can Gratitude Really Effect a Person's Wellbeing?

Introduction

As children, when we were growing up, we—more times than not—are instilled with the lesson that we should be “grateful for the things that we already have” whether something isn’t going the way we want it to or if we desire something that is seemingly out of reach. Then there are the self-help gurus who argue that being grateful for what we already have energetically opens us up to receiving more of that which we are grateful for, more of the things we want, or possibly both. But does it really? For some, the answer is yes; but for others such as me the answer is often no. There is an exercise called the “Three Good Things” gratitude process that entails keeping a journal in which you list at least three good things that has happened that day that you are grateful for (i.g. an attractive person sitting next to you on the train ride home, finding a \$20 bill in the middle of the sidewalk during the walk home, receiving an unexpected phone call or e-mail from a long-time friend or relative you’ve not seen in a long time, etc.), and repeat this process every day for at least a week, and this supposedly is supposed to improve your wellbeing, which it has failed to do for me personally. For me, personally, the “Three Good Things” gratitude process failed to have a positive impact on my emotional wellbeing because

Literature Review

To get a better understanding as to how practicing gratitude does not necessarily improve a person's wellbeing let's look at some key terms that are relevant to this investigation, the first of which being "positive psychology." Christopher Peterson, a University of Michigan psychology professor, defines positive psychology as "the scientific study of what makes life most worth living." Putting this into perspective, it is highly likely that Peterson possibly refers to this "scientific study" as taking a survey of a certain group of people and gather their personal beliefs or opinions as to what they think makes their lives worth living, to which some might say their families, their friends, financial security and stability, etc. However, given that certain things have a different level of importance to different people, it's important to know that positive psychology for one class of people may differ from that of another.

The next term we will examine is "gratitude." Interestingly, when we think of the word "gratitude" our minds generally tend to veer toward the act of saying "thank you" to someone when they pay us a compliment or to someone who has allowed you to borrow her cell phone charger when you are without yours. However, psychologists would argue that the term "gratitude" has a far deeper, much more intuitive meaning behind it while agreeing with the overall "thank you" ideology. Dr. R. Sansone, MD, a Director of Psychiatry Education at Kettering Medical Center in Kettering, Ohio, defines that gratitude "has been conceptualized as a moral virtue, an attitude, an emotion, a habit, a personality trait, and a coping response. 1. A number of researchers have defined gratitude as a positive emotional reaction in response to the receipt of a gift or benefit from someone." This said, even in feeling this type of an emotional response to something positive, it will not be enough to improve someone's wellbeing because

after the satisfaction of positive event, gift, or circumstance has shortly-subsidied, my wellbeing remains unchanged, thus, emotional wellbeing lasts longer than gratitude.

Let's now take a look at what wellbeing is. This is University of Cambridge Psychology Professor Felicia A. Huppert's description of psychological wellbeing:

Psychological well-being is about lives going well. It is the combination of feeling good and functioning effectively. Sustainable well-being does not require individuals to feel good all the time; the experience of painful emotions (e.g. disappointment, failure, grief) is a normal part of life, and being able to manage these negative or painful emotions is essential for long-term well-being. Psychological well-being is, however, compromised when negative emotions are extreme or very long lasting and interfere with a person's ability to function in his or her daily life.

This stated, assuming Huppert's definition of wellbeing is accurate, wellbeing is essentially how well everything is going in our day-to-day lives and how well we can function as a person.

A research study done at ncbi.nlm.nih.gov conflicts the opinion of the aforementioned research. In the section of *this* article entitled "Conflicting Empirical Data" there is no correlation or connection between gratitude and wellbeing, or at least not much. Here are their findings:

Gurel Kirgiz compared a gratitude condition (i.e., composing a letter to someone who made a positive difference in the life of the participant) with a neutral emotional condition, but present levels of gratitude did not evidence a relationship with well-being. Among divorced middle-aged women, Henrie compared those who journaled gratitude experiences with those who read educational materials and those on a wait-list group; the

treatment groups showed no improvement in their satisfaction with life. Finally, Mallen Ozimkowski examined the effect of a 'gratitude visit' (i.e., the writing and delivering of a letter of gratitude to someone in their lives who was never properly thanked) in children and adolescents. In this study, the gratitude exercise was not associated with enhanced well-being.

Despite this one portion of the article makes the claim that gratitude does not improve a person's overall well-being, I'm inclined to agree, as the "Three Good Things" process did not improve mine as the week went on, the process felt more and more like a chore.

Personal Findings

Based on my personal findings, gratitude does little to nothing to improve someone's wellbeing, at least mine. I will go further as to say that it is not enough to improve my well-being. Why? Speaking from personal experience, if something negative happened during my day that has a negative impact on my emotional or physical wellbeing, the good things that happened that same day—or the effects that they have had—are overridden, though I may be grateful they happened still. But feeling grateful for these experiences do nothing to improve how I may personally feel overall. The themes I've experienced during the collection of the data derived from the "Three Good Things" process is feeling "forced" into doing this to see if there will in fact be a change to my well-being (there was none), and there being an effort in looking at things in life from a new perspective. The ideology behind looking at life from a different perspective is similar to gratitude but I find this to be more effective and is what I personally would recommend if someone wants to improve their wellbeing. As an example of this, and the aforementioned data, let's say someone discovers her spouse has been unfaithful toward her. She

may feel devastated, heartbroken, emotionally hurt, angry, sad, etc. depending on how long she and her significant other has been romantically/sexually committed to each other. But at some point during the relationship, this person bought her her favorite assortment of chocolates, roses, and took out the time and effort to build a beautiful birthday cake the year before. The example I am making here is though she may be grateful and feel the gratitude for the birthday gifts as well as the lengths and time her spouse has gone to produce them for her, the gratitude does not do anything to override the pain and hurt she would experience from this person being unfaithful to her. So, no, gratitude does NOT necessarily improve a person's well-being in my opinion.

Conclusion

I will most likely not be continuing conducting the “Three Good Things” process due to my current emotional status. This being due to my emotional outlook not being at a high-enough state for me to commit to doing another “Three Good Things” process. Once I begin looking at things in my life from a more positive perspective and outlook, I highly anticipate I will resume the “Three Good Things” process and that it will feel good for me to commit to. The main take-aways from your research project are that this research project has given me reminders of some of the teachings of Abraham-Hicks and the Law of Attraction: the reason why we want anything in life, ever, is that we believe we will feel better in the acquisition of having it. How does this relate to gratitude? I've learned while working on this that gratitude is a feel-good state. It is widely believed that when we receive something we want in life, we feel better emotionally. When we do not acquire that thing, we do not feel that feeling of positivity or that of gratitude. Also, despite committing to feeling grateful for what is already possessed, the feeling from such a practice is generally not all that great due to that feeling of lack. So therefore, the phrase

“gratitude improves well-being” should be reversed into “well-being improves gratitude.” The following are questions I would ask if I were interested in researching this topic farther? Who coined the ideology or belief that gratitude improves well-being? What was their state or belief system when they started that ideology? Lastly, what was this person's outlook on life in general? What do they suggest for people who are not very happy in life and would like to change this?

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