Creating a Gratitude Practice
Clinical Tool

This document has been written for clinicians. The content was developed by the Integrative Medicine Program, Department of Family Medicine, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health in cooperation with Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, under contract to the Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation, Veterans Health Administration.

Information is organized according to the diagram above, the Components of Proactive Health and Well-Being. While conventional treatments may be covered to some degree, the focus is on other areas of Whole Health that are less likely to be covered elsewhere and may be less familiar to most readers. There is no intention to dismiss what conventional care has to offer. Rather, you are encouraged to learn more about other approaches and how they may be used to complement conventional care. The ultimate decision to use a given approach should be based on many factors, including patient preferences, clinician comfort level, efficacy data, safety, and accessibility. No one approach is right for everyone; personalizing care is of fundamental importance.
WHOLE HEALTH: CHANGE THE CONVERSATION
Creating a Gratitude Practice
Clinical Tool

If the only prayer you said in your whole life was “thank you” that would suffice.
—Meister Eckert

The Importance of Gratitude

One of the greatest contributing factors to overall happiness and well-being is the amount of gratitude that a person experiences. Gratitude involves noticing and appreciating the positives in life. Gratitude is both (1) an attitude and (2) a practice.

Gratitude is universal and found across all cultures and all people.1 It is considered a virtue and is different from optimism, hope, and trust. Emmons and McCullough state that the root of the word gratitude is the Latin root gratia, which means “grace, graciousness, or gratefulness . . . all derivatives from this Latin root having to do with kindness, generosity, gifts, the beauty of giving and receiving, or getting something for nothing.”2

What Does the Research Tell Us?

An increasing range of empirical research has found that gratitude can improve a sense of personal well-being in two ways:2

- As a direct cause of well-being and
- Indirectly, as a means of buffering against negative states and emotions, and making us more resilient to stress.

A number of researchers have proposed a theoretical relationship between gratitude and well-being. Experiencing gratitude, thankfulness, and appreciation tends to foster positive feelings, which in turn contribute to one’s overall sense of well-being.3

Gratitude has been linked to a host of psychological, physical, and social benefits, such as:

- More feelings of happiness, pride, and hope4
- A greater sense of social connection among many others and cooperation—feeling less lonely and isolated5
- A reduction in risk for depression, anxiety, and substance abuse disorders6
- Improvement in body image7
- Spurring acts of kindness, generosity, and cooperation8,9
- Resilience in the face of trauma-induced stress, recovering more quickly from illness, and enjoying more robust physical health10
- Improvement in sleep and energy11
Cultivating an Attitude of Gratitude

**Grateful Contemplation Exercise 1, adapted from Ryan and colleagues**

Take a few minutes right now to reflect on a happy moment in your own life that stands out for you—a memory that is still strong and has remained with you, even if it happened 10, 20, or 40 years ago. Re-experience it. Visualize the scene, hear the sounds that were around you, feel the sensations in your body. What was it about that experience that stays with you? Was gratitude part of it? What was happening that allowed you to feel grateful? Write down your reflections in the space below:


**Grateful Contemplation Exercise 2**

We cannot change what life presents. We can, however, choose our attitude in any given circumstance. You can practice consciously choosing to cultivate gratitude with this daily practice:

Practice stopping and having an attitude of gratitude throughout the day. You might incorporate a cue, like sitting down for a meal, hearing an alarm go off, or commuting home, to turn your mind to gratitude. Acknowledge and savor the positive experiences of your day.

List a few cues you can use to remind you to stop and practice an attitude of gratitude:


**Benefits of a Written Gratitude Practice**

Another way to foster gratitude is to create daily lists of things for which to be grateful. Research has shown health benefits to this written gratitude practice. For example, people who kept gratitude journals on a weekly basis exercised more regularly, reported fewer physical symptoms, felt better about their lives as a whole, and were more optimistic about the upcoming week compared with those who recorded neutral life events or hassles. A daily gratitude journal has been associated with higher positive states of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, attentiveness, and energy. Those who journaled daily about gratitude were also more likely to report helping someone with a personal problem or offering emotional support to another person. Wood and colleagues found that a daily
WhOLE HEALTHe: CHANGE THE CONVERSATION
Clinical Tool: Creating a Gratitude Practice

cratitude practice was associated better sleep, more energy, fewer symptoms of illness, and more happiness.\textsuperscript{11} Seligman and colleagues discovered that writing about three good things that happened each day and why they happened made people happier and less depressed up to 6 months later.\textsuperscript{13}

**How to begin a daily gratitude journal practice**
At the end of each day, find a regular time to reflect on the day’s events and write down five things that you are grateful for. As you write them down, spend a few moments to reflect on their value to you. This makes it more likely for this practice to boost your mood. Research shows that writing down these things has advantage over just thinking about them.

It is recommended that you get a special journal to record your gratitude list. Some people prefer to use a jar where they store pieces of paper that each have something they are grateful for listed on them. Other people use social media, such as Facebook, to record their daily list. There are also several apps that allow you to record your gratitude-inspiring events, if you would prefer. Your list could include simple everyday things, people in your life, personal strengths or talents, moments of natural beauty, or gestures of kindness from others. Consider reviewing your list once a month or once a year to remind you of the good things in your life.

**How often is it optimal to journal?**
It is recommended to start by journaling daily, but after a while research shows that just *once a week* is enough to lead to significant changes. Make certain not to overdo it. Writing once or twice a week is more beneficial than daily journaling long-term about gratitude. One study showed that writing once a week for 6 weeks boosted happiness; writing three times a week did not.\textsuperscript{14}

**Expressing Gratitude to Others**
We all have had people who have influenced our lives. The mere act of expressing gratitude has been shown to boost happiness and make us less depressed.

**Research on its effectiveness**
Seligman and colleagues studied the impact of a gratitude intervention where participants completed a “gratitude visit” where they wrote and then delivered a letter of gratitude in person to someone who had been especially kind to them but had never been properly thanked.\textsuperscript{13} Participants, 1 week after doing the assignment, experienced significantly increased happiness and decreased depression for up to 1 month after they delivered their letters.

**Action steps**
Consider doing that exercise yourself. Think about expressing gratitude to someone who has made a difference in your life that you may not have thanked. You might tell them in person, write them a letter, or send them an e-mail where you describe in detail what they did for you, how it affected your life, and how you often remember their efforts. Be specific.
WHOLE HEALTH: CHANGE THE CONVERSATION
Clinical Tool: Creating a Gratitude Practice

about what you are grateful for. It makes the expression of gratitude feel more authentic, for it reveals that you were paying attention to what they did.

Informal practice
If you find your gratitude practice is getting stale, switch to another format and mix it up a bit make it work for you. Some other ways to practice gratitude include:

- Pick one co-worker each day and express thanks for what he or she is doing for the organization.
- Go around the dinner table and share one thing each person is grateful for that happened that day.
- Express appreciation about what your partner, child, or friend does and who they are as a person.
- Go for a walk with a friend and talk about what you are most grateful for.
- Do an art project that focuses on your blessings.
- Write a thank you letter to yourself.
- Give thanks for your body.
- Pause to experience wonder about some of the ordinary moments of your life.
- Imagine your life without the good things in it, so as not to take things for granted.

Whole Health: Change the Conversation Website

Interested in learning more about Whole Health? Browse our website for information on personal and professional care.

http://projects.hsl.wisc.edu/SERVICE/index.php

This clinical tool was written by Shilagh A. Mirgain, PhD, Senior Psychologist, and Clinical Assistant Professor, Department of Orthopedics and Rehabilitation, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health, and by Janice Singles, PsyD, Distinguished Psychologist, and Clinical Assistant Professor, Department of Orthopedics and Rehabilitation, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health.

References

WHOLE HEALTH: CHANGE THE CONVERSATION
Clinical Tool: Creating a Gratitude Practice


