

Well@Work Podcast Season 2, Episode 12: Cultivating an Attitude of Gratitude

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA. On this episode, Emily Smith gives some tips on cultivating an attitude of gratitude to enhance your well-being. And now, Emily Smith.

I'm Emily Smith with the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. About two years ago, we had our lives rearranged by COVID. And while we have become accustomed to many of the changes, it's not over yet. Fear, uncertainty, grief, and stress can take a toll. We can take some steps to stay healthy during this time by cultivating gratitude. You may wonder how you can feel grateful after the impact that COVID has had on you, especially if you're a healthcare worker who has been exhausted physically and emotionally by caring for others. But the field of positive psychology shows that reframing your view and choosing to see the goodness, benefits, or gifts in your life can have a positive impact on mind, body, and relationships. Gratitude is an acknowledgement of the good things in life; more than a thank you from a patient, gratitude is a positive emotional response to giving or receiving a benefit. The powerful response can boost well-being and allows for growth after a stressful time, like a pandemic. Grateful people have been found to be more resilient to stress over time and report greater levels of happiness and life satisfaction.

There are also significant health benefits associated with gratitude. Feeling grateful can boost the immune system, improve sleep, and lower blood pressure. Gratitude has been found to positively impact the brain, where it activates the amygdala and hippocampus, helping to regulate emotional responses to stress. It also prompts the release of oxytocin, serotonin, and dopamine, hormones that improve well-being by boosting our mood. Gratitude has been shown to reduce cortisol, a stress hormone that increases inflammation, which can lead to poor health outcomes.

Research also shows that healthcare workers who spent time twice a week writing down things they were grateful for led to improvements in productivity and quality of care for patients. Workplaces with a culture of gratitude, where supervisors thanked their team and care providers feel appreciated for their hard work, had employees who reported they

are 50% happier and more productive. Such a simple change with a real benefit for both the staff and the patients.

Let's look at a healthcare organization with a culture of gratitude. As the rest of the country was in the first wave of COVID, Kevin and his co-workers were in a heightened state of alert, ready for an influx of patients. By the time they had their first patients with COVID, they had been on high alert for months. Kevin and his supervisor, along with a chaplain, and other administrators at the hospital worked to build a support team of hospital personnel to address the challenges they expected. A key component of their organization's strength is gratitude practice, which Kevin calls an attitude of gratitude. Kevin shared some of the ways that people in his organization built their attitude of gratitude.

Tip one: write it down. Kevin said when he began going to a support group he thought the idea of gratitude was ridiculous and he wondered what he had to feel grateful for. But he gave it a try. At the end of each day, he started listing three things he was thankful for and he soon realized that it improved his sleep and that he woke up feeling refreshed, so he kept it up. Kevin writes his three things down each night in a journal and reviews them weekly.

Tip 2: don't feel guilty for feeling happy. I am sure that some healthcare workers may feel that the bad effects from the pandemic outweigh the good. The feelings of grief, sadness, and other negative emotions may lead some to feel guilty for celebrating successes or feeling happy. But feeling positive emotions is not betraying the memory of those who have suffered the most during the COVID pandemic. Gratitude won't erase the complex emotions we feel after a series of stressful or traumatic events, but it can help provide perspective on the situation and may reduce the feelings of loss or pain for a time.

Tip 3: combine gratitude with mindfulness. Mindfulness encourages you to be present and aware of the things happening around you, it can ground you, energize you, reduce stress, and improve your overall well-being. Adding mindfulness to your gratitude practice is simple and takes just a few moments of your day, but it can have a lasting positive influence. It can be as simple as sitting somewhere comfortably, closing your eyes, taking a few deep breaths, and listing who and what you're grateful for. If you're interested in a longer meditation, there are many on the free app Insight Timer. Find a link in the episode notes.

Tip 4: practice makes progress. At first, it may seem that nothing's happening, so you consider giving up your gratitude journal or meditation. Like many of the small changes we make, the results may be difficult to see at first, which can be discouraging. As



with any skill, it takes time to get better at it. Few of us are great at new things, it took practice to be good enough at a skill for it to seem natural, like reading. Through practice, you begin to recognize positive things in your life that you might not have in the past. If you write your thoughts in a gratitude journal, you have tangible evidence of your practice, which many find helpful.

Tip 5: acknowledge the challenges. There will be days when you struggle to find something to be grateful for and negative thoughts replace positive ones. Start by acknowledging the negative thoughts and then give yourself permission to let them go. If you have enough energy, try replacing a negative thought with a positive one. Instead of thinking "I have nothing to be grateful for," think "I am grateful for this moment." That simple, conscious switch can help you reframe your view of the situation.

I am grateful that you spent time listening to this podcast today, thank you for all you do for others, and remember to stay Well@Work.

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