

FOUR WAYS GRATITUDE HELPS YOU WITH DIFFICULT FEELINGS

By Elizabeth Hopper¹

Research suggests that grateful people are more skillful at coping with stress and regulating their emotions

Feeling grateful can bring us a variety of benefits, including better mental and physical health and improved relationships. We tend to think of gratitude as an emotion we experience when things are going well, one that is closely associated with well-being and contentment. But does it serve any purpose when life isn't so rosy?

As researchers have investigated why feeling grateful brings such wide-ranging benefits, they've uncovered that gratitude isn't just puppies and positive thinking. One reason why gratitude is so powerful might be that it helps us manage difficult emotions more effectively: When we feel grateful, we might be better at coping with stressful, negative, and frustrating situations.

According to this research, gratitude doesn't just make us feel good—it also has a useful function when life is hard. Grateful people tend to cope with stress in smarter ways and regulate their negative emotions more skillfully. Here are four ways gratitude can help you manage your emotions when you're faced with challenges in life.

1. Grateful people cope with stress in healthy ways

When we're under stress, there are a variety of possible ways we can cope—some healthier than others. Research suggests that gratitude may help us take advantage of the more useful ones.

In a 2007 study in the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, psychologist Alex Wood and his colleagues asked 236 undergraduate students to report on how grateful they felt and how they generally coped with stressful events. The researchers found that more grateful people were more likely to take steps to actively deal with their problems or try to look for

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“silver linings” (a technique that psychologists call “positive reframing”) compared to less grateful people. Additionally, more grateful people were less likely to disengage (to stop trying to solve their problems) and to blame themselves for the problems in the first place. Why did grateful people choose healthier styles of coping? One possibility is that gratitude essentially leads people to see the world through rose-colored glasses. Wood and his colleagues write, “This perception of the world as a hospitable place may likely lead to an increased willingness to deal actively with problems.” In other words, grateful people feel more optimistic about solving their problems successfully, so they’re less likely to avoid or disengage from them.

Another possible explanation, Wood and his colleagues suggest, is how positive emotions affect our mental state. According to Barbara Fredrickson’s “broaden-and-build” model, positive emotions like gratitude help us to think in more innovative and creative ways, which helps us build resources we can draw upon when things get difficult. If gratitude spurs creative thinking, that might be why we find it easier to put a positive spin on stressful or negative events. In fact, a [2009 survey study](#) college students found that participants who were more grateful at the beginning of the study were more likely to use positive reframing to cope with stress over the following month.

2. Grateful people benefit from the support of others

Another healthy coping strategy that gratitude may promote is seeking out our support networks.

In the study by Wood and his colleagues, grateful people were also more likely than their less grateful counterparts to reach out to others in the midst of stress. And a 2019 study in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* by Nathan Deichert and his colleagues suggests that gratitude may help people benefit more from that social support when they receive it.

In this new study, participants journaled about gratitude or a neutral topic for five minutes. They then went through a stressful task (giving a speech), for which some participants received social support (positive feedback during the speech). The researchers found that participants’ stress levels were lowest if they received social support and had previously written about gratitude, suggesting that gratitude may amplify the benefits that we get from other people’s kindness.

Grateful people feel appreciative about previous times when others have helped them, Wood and his colleagues point out, and that may explain why they seek out support—they probably believe that others will help them again in the future. According to psychologist

Sara Algoe's theory, part of gratitude's function is to help us identify people who will be supportive of us and strengthen our relationships with them. Gratitude seems to help us notice the people in our lives who are there to help us.

3. Gratitude can help you control your reaction to negative events

Not only do grateful people seem to engage in helpful habits when they're faced with stress, but research suggests that gratitude also changes our experience of negative emotions.

In a 2019 study in the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, by Paulo Boggio and his colleagues, 71 undergraduate students completed a writing exercise twice a week for four weeks. Participants either wrote about gratitude or wrote about everyday, non-emotional experiences. Then, they were shown a series of positive and negative pictures. For some of the pictures, participants were instructed merely to view them. For other pictures, participants were instructed to try to increase their positive emotions (in response to the positive ones) or decrease their negative emotions (in response to the negative ones). After each picture was presented, participants completed a brief rating of their emotions. The researchers found that participants who had written about gratitude for a month were better at decreasing their emotional reactions to the negative pictures. Why? The researchers suggest that gratitude might have helped participants to cultivate "a general positive attitude towards life" that allowed them to protect their emotional state.

But something else might have been going on below the surface. An intriguing pattern of results emerged when researchers looked at the types of words that participants had used in their writings. Compared to participants who wrote about neutral topics, participants who wrote about what they were grateful for used more words related to cognitive processes (for example, words showing insight into the topic, or words talking about cause and effect). Since these types of words would be involved in the process of reappraising negative events, the researchers suggest that the gratitude group may have been better at reframing when viewing the negative pictures. This healthy emotion regulation strategy, which grateful people are inclined toward, might be key in helping them manage their negative emotions.

4. Gratitude can help you to be less impatient

Imagine that you're shopping for a new product, and you're trying to decide between two versions. One version is available to buy in a store today. There's also a cheaper, better

version online—but the catch is that it won't arrive in the mail for a few weeks. Which product would you choose?

People's ability to manage their impatience and wait for better rewards in the future is referred to by psychologists as delay of gratification. It's a form of emotion regulation that requires people to replace "hot" (more emotional) ways of thinking with "cool" (less emotional) ways of thinking. Among other benefits, people who score higher on a delay-of-gratification test as children tend to be better at coping with stress as adults. And, according to research, gratitude may help us to delay gratification.

In a 2014 study in *Psychological Science*, researchers asked 75 participants to remember a time they felt grateful, a time they felt happy, or what they did on a usual day. The participants then made a series of choices between smaller, short-term rewards (i.e., receiving less money but sooner) or larger, long-term rewards (i.e., receiving more money later). For example, one question asked participants, "Would you rather receive \$40 now or \$55 62 days from now?"

The researchers found that participants who had written about gratitude were more likely to pick the larger rewards that they had to wait longer for (compared to participants in the happy or neutral groups). In other words, gratitude seems to help us manage our impatient urges.

While it might seem paradoxical to think about things we're grateful for in more stressful situations, people who do this experience a variety of benefits: healthier coping, a greater sense of social support, less negative emotions, and less impatience. In other words, those times when gratitude doesn't come as naturally to us might be exactly when we need it most.

About the author:

Elizabeth Hopper, Ph.D., received her Ph.D. in psychology from UC Santa Barbara and currently works as a freelance science writer specializing in psychology and mental health.