

Positive psychology techniques: gratitude

Article

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Positive Psychology: Gratitude

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Abstract

This article builds on a descriptive paper on positive psychology coaching and several previous techniques papers. This paper explores the application of gratitude, and its associated benefits, as a part of positive psychology coaching practice.

Key words:

Gratitude; positive psychology coaching.

Gratitude

Gratitude is a concept which has become diminished in western society, almost in parallel with the increasing wealth which most of its members enjoy. Wealth, possessions and health have for many become expected norms rather than personal 'blessings' that are appreciated. As expectations have changed, so gratitude has diminished. Gratitude has, for many, been replaced by disappointment, anger and resentment when these expected 'blessings' either do not appear or they disappear. This view contrasts with many religious traditions. Jews may start the day with Modeh Ani, a short Hebrew blessing in which God is thanked for life. The Christian tradition too shows gratitude to God for blessings, for example from food, with a short prayer of Grace, to thanks for family, life and the many blessings which life bestows. Gratitude in the Buddhist tradition can be linked to the concept of dependent origin, in which all things originate from other things; hence existence itself implying a form of gratitude.

Some writers (Emmons, 2008) have suggested that gratitude serves a social function in helping build and maintain relationships between family members and the wider kinship group. More importantly, gratitude encourages individuals to focus their attention on the positive aspects of their life, in contrast with dwelling on negative issues and events.

Research too (cf. McCullough, Emmons & Tsang, 2002) has linked gratitude with hope, life satisfaction and more proactive behaviours towards others.

By applying these insights through simple exercises for coachees, similar positive effects have been found (see Emmons, 2008). For coachees who are Christians, as well as those with other religious beliefs, the exercise can be set around finding a time of day to reflect on the good things in the coachee's life. The coachee can say a short two minute prayer expressing gratitude for these blessings: a convenient time is at the end of a day. For coachees without a faith, a reflective exercise can be set where the coachee is asked to spend a similar short period reflecting on the things which they most appreciate during their day.

This technique can be adapted for conflict situations, with the coachee asked to reflect on the individual with whom they are in conflict. Similarly, where a relationship is less strong, the coachee is invited to reflect and identify one (or - even better - two or three) characteristics they admire or appreciate in the other person. By expressing gratitude for these aspects of the person, and by focusing attention on these aspects, an anchor can be provided which may allow the relationship to develop.

This technique can form a regular routine that the coachee can develop and which can be used to help build positivity and manage workplace stress, challenging times or difficult situations. This can be done through using a 'gratitude diary' or letters. Which of these tools to use will depend on the individual their situation, with some research suggesting that we need to be cautious in offering only one 'gratitude' technique (Emmons, 2008).

Research by Seligman *et al.* (2005) found individuals who did this task daily become bored, whilst those asked to write down their gratitude felt anxious about their writing becoming public (Emmons, 2008). This echoes our own personal experiences of using these techniques. If overdone, this exercise can become boring and repetitive, so it may be better undertaken as a weekly task or as a felt expression of thanks rather than merely expressing an obligation or task to be fulfilled. Further meditation, as opposed to a written note, may make this activity less demanding whilst producing the same benefits.

In short, when selecting gratitude tasks for coachees, discuss the task with the individual, offering them a selection of activities. This allows the coachee to tailor the task to their individual situation and preferences. In addition, provide them with space to talk about any anxieties or feelings concerning the task and periodically review the coachee's progress.

Conclusion

This short technique of gratitude can help both coaches and coachees in the development of positivity, potentially leading to enhanced well-being.

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