

The Healing Benefits of Gratitude

Because of how our brains work, we tend to over-focus on painful and negative events while under-focusing on pleasant experiences. Actually, the more pain we experience, the less we are naturally inclined to notice opportunities for gratitude.

Gratitude is a powerful tool...since what you rest your attention upon is what will shape your brain the most. That's because "neurons that fire together, wire together." Gratitude shifts your attention away from resentment, regret, and guilt – and therefore stops you from building up the neural substrates of these known factors of mental and physical health problems. –Rick Hanson

Developing a mindset of gratitude does not mean we are meant to ignore our moments of suffering. When life has hard moments, we can:

- notice them *without* dwelling on them
- allow others to care for us *instead of* pushing others away
- let go of suffering *versus* becoming despondent

Gratitude can be noticed in a number of everyday moments and practiced in many different ways. The art of gratitude comes in developing your own perspectives. Let's have some group brainstorming:

What are some things you feel grateful for...

- In nature?
- About your family?
- About your health?

Practicing Gratitude

Rick Hanson's H-E-A-L model

H – Have an experience

Activate the memory of a good experience you are grateful for. It could be anything that fills you with a pleasant sensation, like a scene from nature, someone's smile, a spiritual encounter, or a happy memory.

E – Enhance the experience

Duration: Stay in the memory as long as possible. The longer the neurons fire together the more they wire together to form new neuropathways. The more intensely the neurons fire, the more likely they wire.

Multi-modality: Use your five senses to keep the neurons firing intensively over time.

A – Absorb the experience

Notice what is enjoyable and rewarding about the experience (being alert releases norepinephrine and anticipating a reward releases dopamine; both promote synaptic formation and hardwire the beneficial experience).

L – Link the experience

Linking involves an awareness of two things at once. I hold a positive memory and a negative memory at the same time. If the positive is more prominent than the negative, the positive "will gradually ease, soothe, and eventually replace the negative material."