

Gratitude by Rebecca Morgan-Jones

As life starts to get back to a little bit of normality, do you feel nervous? If you do, that's totally understandable as we've been tucked up in our houses for weeks. The threat of Covid-19 may have made us all feel like the world has become an unsafe place.

I'm going to share some tips on how to apply a great technique to your life which will help you feel that the world isn't an unsafe place and give you some tools to view things in this way.

Have you heard of 'gratitude'? I'm sure you have heard the word before; maybe you will have heard or even had a go at the practice.

A definition of 'gratitude' – 'The quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness'.

It's a technique that has been proven to release the happy chemicals in the brain, such as serotonin, and if practised for a long period of time, it can actually make long term changes to the brain's function.

To practise it, you focus on the good stuff in your life. All too often we think about what we haven't got and what hasn't gone right, but this will never make us happy. If we can train ourselves to always see the best bit - the good bits in bad situations, events, people - then we can be happier, healthier and more resilient.

Gratitude can improve our mental well-being by making us feel more connected; if we view the world with gratitude the world becomes a less scary place.

When we focus on the good, it's just not possible to spend time worrying about the bad. The brain is wired up to keep us safe, it notices threats in the environment. This can be a good thing as it has kept us alive since the beginning of the human race but today we want to be both alive *and* happy!

So, if we are someone who focuses too much on the negative, gratitude can really encourage and nurture a softer, more kind mind-set.

Gratitude can help us 'flip' the mind when we are angry, low or sad. It can also aid depression, anxiety and worry. By consciously choosing and focusing on the good stuff, it stops us filling our minds with the bad stuff.

How could it help?

Physically

Gratitude can help us physically by improving our sleep patterns. It can help aid pain, it can lower blood pressure, it can even improve our immune system. When we start to appreciate our bodies and the way we look we naturally want to look after them by exercising more and eating the right foods which in turn give us more energy and make us feel great.

Relationships and friendships

Being grateful for those around us can really improve the way we interact with each other. Seeing the best bits in people, rather than focusing on the bad bits can make you feel so much more appreciate of the people in your life. Tell people how thankful you are to have them in your life and see how it makes you and them feel. Relationships at home could feel under strain at the moment as you've been together for so long, so try and apply this teaching to your family members to see if it improves relationships within the household.

Ways you could use the idea of 'gratitude':

- Commit to it.
- Every morning and every night - think of three things you are grateful for. Or, think of one thing you are grateful for, one thing you have done that has made you feel proud or one thing that you have done that is kind.
- Write it down – keep a journal and write your thoughts in it. It's good to revisit when you're struggling to feel thankful.
- Leave mobile phones out of the room, as this will stop you looking at them as soon as you wake up in the morning. This time could be spent thinking of great stuff that will start your day off on a positive.

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- If you're having a really bad day (which you still will have even when you've been practising gratitude for a *long* time!), practise moment-to-moment gratitude, where you say 'thank you' for everything. By doing this, you're encouraging yourself to see the best bits in everyday things. It helps us to not lose sight of the good stuff in the midst of a situation/event that might be hard to deal with.
- Just say 'thank you' over and over again in situations where you may feel nervous or an emotion that is not helpful. You don't have to be saying 'thank you' for anything in particular, just the words can have a positive impact on the brain, which has a knock-on effect on how we feel and act.
- Set a timer on your phone that goes off every so often to remind you to stop and think of three things you are grateful for.
- Create visual reminders like sticky notes, pictures or written text.
- Add gratitude into another thing you do. Maybe, when you're making your breakfast, use this time to be thankful. Do it when you're in the shower, waiting for the bus, brushing your teeth, in the bath, etc.
- Be specific – being grateful for your friends is great, but what is it that they do that you are actually thankful for?
- The small things – the breeze on your skin, the sun on your face, a warm, cosy bed. Encouraging our brain to see the small 'wins' stops us wanting big fixes in life. According to Harvard Happiness researcher, Shawn Achor, doing this for 21 days will encourage the brain to look at the world in a very different way. You'll see the world's positives rather than its threats.
- Write gratitude letters - these can be to yourself or someone else. You don't have to send them, just the act of writing down how you feel about someone can have profound effects on the way you feel. If you are brave enough to send them, it will not only make the participant feel fantastic, but it will make you feel great, too. If you're really brave, actually read the letter out loud to that person yourself.
- Actually say 'thank you' to people.
- Encourage friends and family to have conversations that are grateful rather than negative. Set time aside at meal times for this.
- Notice the good- the more we CHOOSE to see the good, the happier we will be.
- Always ask yourself what you are tuned into: are you listening to negative or positive FM in your head? What frequency would you choose to tune in to? What's going to make you feel good?

Author profile: Rebecca has worked in education for nearly 20 years, starting off her career in a Fresh Start school in the city of Nottingham and soon taking over the position of Head of Art at Toot Hill School. Rebecca moved on from middle leadership to join the Associate School Leader team, where she was responsible for delivering training such as middle leadership courses, coordinating programmes including those for trainee teachers, NQTs and RQTs. Currently, Rebecca is a system support leader for Nova Education Trust and member of the Well-Being Working Group. Rebecca is passionate about people and working to supporting them in their career. Making sure teachers are happy and they truly enjoy coming to work is her real driver. This passion led her to train to be a mind-set coach. When she's not working in an educational setting, Rebecca delivers training to various schools, corporate settings and individuals on mind-set and being conscious about the way we think. Rebecca is also a qualified yoga and meditation instructor; she has written and delivered wellness days and high-end yoga retreats.