Effect of Gratitude on Wellbeing: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Gratitude is the ultimate source of happiness. Gratitude is strongly associated with happiness and joy. People who are grateful and happy with what they have are happier and report higher levels of wellbeing. Wellbeing of a person is defined as a positive sense about life and feeling good(Diener, Suh , Oishi 1997; Veenhoven 2008). Gratitude can be defined as a "moral virtue, an attitude, an emotion, a habit, a personality trait, and a coping response" (Emmons et al., 2003) and simply can be practiced by recognizing something good, thinking about something good and paying attention to something for what you feel happy; something you appreciate in your life. Higher level of wellbeing decreases the risk rate of disease and improves functioning of immune system, speed recovery and increases longevity (Pressman et al., 2005; Ostiret al.,2000; Diener, Biswas-Diener2008;Frederickson & Levenson 1998). When we feel grateful, the body becomes calm and the nice thing about gratitude is that it is easy to practice, and you can quickly start to see the benefits. The present paper explores how gratitude and wellbeing relates and review of related researches revealed that gratitude positively related with wellbeing.Gratitude improves person's mental health, happiness and many other benefits are relates with by practicing gratitude. It can be concluded that gratitude is a most influential strength which can be used to sustain the happiness level. Hence gratitude contributes in satisfaction with life(Wood et al., 2008).

Keywords: Gratitude, Wellbeing, Happiness

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Introduction:

Gratitude is a state of thankfulness or appreciation. Grateful individuals show high levels of "agreeableness, extraversion, openness, and low levels of neuroticism" (McCullough et al., 2002). Gratitude practice lower the blood pressure, Improve immune function, decreases the level of cortisol by 23%,quality of sleep improves by 10% , lower blood sugar levels by 13%. (Valikhani et al., 2019).Numbers of researchers have agreed how positively gratitude related to wellbeing. Gratitude is most valuable character strength, and intensely related with satisfaction of life and wellbeing (Park et al., 2004). Person's ability to appreciate his/her life situations can be effective coping technique in which he/she interpret problematic situation in a positive manner (Fredricksonet al., 2003). Wood with his colleagues2008 in a sample of 389 adults, showed the relationship between gratitude and well -being and determined that gratitude exclusively relates with life satisfaction. Another research was conducted by Froh et al. (2008)with 221 adolescents and different activities were assigned to them, one exercise is counting one's blessings, others are hassles condition and a control condition. Result of the study reported that counting blessings was an effective intervention for improving well –being among adolescents as compared with conditions. Practicing gratitude also changes the brain structure and functions. An fMRI scan study revealed that writing gratitude journal influences the prefrontal cortex of brain which stimulates mood and strengthen the feeling of altruism and compassion as compared to other group who only writes only general experiences(Karns, et al., (2017). One study revealed this expressing gratitude have impact in upwelling activity in the media prefrontal cortex part of the brain as compared to just feeing of gratitude (Kini, et al., 2016).Lechner, (2019 pointing out that practicing gratitude actives releases of surge of dopamine neurotransmitter which is associated with happiness. In addition to dopamine Korb(2015) says in his book *"The Upward Spiral: Using Neuroscience to Reverse the Course of Depression, One Small Change at a Time*" gratitude also boosts the level of serotonin in anterior cingulated cortex, which is also a happy hormone. Woodet al., (2010) suggested that there are three general methods have been identified for induction of the gratitude: gratitude lists, express gratitude and grateful contemplation. Emmons and McCullough (2003) in their study

participant were assigned different activities like hassle activity , making gratitude list and general life event and communicated to keep records of their mood, coping activities, physical symptoms, overall life appraisal for nine weeks. The result of the study it was depict that participant who makes gratitude list shows positive emotions, higher level of gratitude, less illness symptoms. Clinical researches reveal that gratitude intervention can be used effectively to deal with excessive worries, body dissatisfaction. (Geraghty et al.,2010a, 2010b). Gratitude journaling intervention has a long term effect on mental wellbeing, while other intervention writing gratitude letters is a more social intervention having more powerful impact (Kaczmarek et al.,2015). Gratitude journaling increase quality of sleep, decline signs of ill health, and enhance joyfulness state. Lau and Cheung (2011) in their study with older adult's age range 55–85 used three different activities to discover the effect of gratitude. One activity used for research is of narrative writing task on experienced life events, second group writing on happenings which encourage gratitude, hassles, and a third group is neutral explanations of life. The outcomes of the study indicatedthat the gratitude induction writing task compressed death anxiety among older adults more than the other task given to participants. They also put forward that gratitude is an essentialpowerful strength to feel less fear of death for older adults. Sheldon (2006) suggested that grateful people tends to experience more positive emotion. Study by Wood et al.(2009)estimated that higher levels of gratefulness improved quality of sleep and sleep time. Daily gratitude diary intervention decreases depression level of the clinical sample (Southwell &Gould2017).By keeping gratitude journal for three weeks increases the level of positive affect among students of first-year (Işık & Ergüner-Tekinalp 2017).Studies showing that state and trait level of gratitude is absolutely correlated with the positive emotions, happiness, hopefulness, satisfaction with life and adversely related with signs of depression , negative emotions and nervousness(Emmons & McCullough, 2003; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). A study conducting to find if expressing gratitude strengthen the relationships and after intervention it was found that expressing gratitude positively influence the relationship(Lambert et al., 2010), and build up and satisfying social bonding (Algoe et al., 2008). Williams and Bartlett (2015) proposed that person who shows gratitude feels more connection with new peers, and expressing gratitude also facilitated the perception of interpersonal warmth. Person who focused more on being grateful rather than on anger exhibits improvement in number of physiological functions like improved heart rate, pulse, and respiration rates. (McCraty et al., 1995). Clinical and non-clinical persons usually show increment in mental wellbeing with gratitude intervention(Sin & Lyubomirsky,2009). Employees who have higher level of wellbeing are more productive at their workplace and more likely to help community(Frey &Stutzer 2002; Tov& Diener 2008). Gratitude interventions can be used as a primary prevention technique to raise resilience level (Lies, et al., 2014; Parks & Biswas-Diener, 2013), as well as cultivating well-being of clinical patients (Sin, et al., 2011).

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to explore the relation between gratitude and wellbeing and on the basis of review it can be concluded that gratitude has threshold positive relationship with wellbeing. State gratitude consists of those experiences/feelings which are experienced in particular situation, and with feeling of gratitude there is strong and brief physiological change occurs (Roberts,2004).As a trait, gratitude can be stated as a "virtue or characteristic of people, and can differ in intensity, frequency, and span"and trait gratitude positively associated with satisfaction with life, pleasure, hopefulness, and positive affect (McCullough et al., 2002).Watkins et al. (2003); Woodward et al.(2003) investigated in their study that dispositional gratitude increases positive emotion, life satisfaction, happiness, hope, mental strength and reduces depression, and physical aggression. Gratitude as trait is strongly associated with feeling more positive emotions and lesser negative emotions(Kashdan et al., 2006). Gratitude works as a motivator also that motivates social action for others(Roberts, 2004). Some investigators says it an "essential lubricant to social interaction" (Buck, 2004, p. 110).Seligman et al. (2005) says counting blessings daily is helpful to the general population for increasing levels of happiness and

well-being, sustain happiness level and decrease levels of depression and negative thoughts. Different researchers concluded that gratitude is important for social and physical emotional health.Ma et al. (2017) reveals that gratitude positively relates with the prosocial behavior and also suggested that gratitude improves health, greater the gratitude the healthier the personis (Singh et al., 2014), lower the blood pressure(Emmons& Stern 2013). Gratitudeis like other positive emotion which motivates person to engage in self- improvement positive behavior(Armenta et al., 2017). Numerous exercises are used as interventions in therapy for improving wellbeing like counting blessings, writing or sending gratitude letter, gratitude journaling, three good things exercise can be used for cultivating gratitude, thinking about somebody for whom you are thankful, gratitude meditating exercise, practicing saying "thank you" and religious practice like gratitude prayer.

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