

Mindfulness and Gratitude

Today is the thirteenth in a series of articles on mindfulness. To review, mindfulness is a form of stress reduction. In the simplest terms, mindfulness is paying attention to the present moment without judgment. It focuses our attention on the only moment in which we are alive, which is right now. Paying attention in this way can reduce stress, depression, anxiety and even potentially bring about healing. Today I will discuss the stress reduction benefits of gratitude and its relationship to mindfulness.

Before I do that, I have two quick announcements. First is that my web site at www.drmcquaid.com has been updated to include the most recent articles on mindfulness. There are now over 40 articles posted on stress reduction and 13 dedicated to mindfulness. Second is to let readers know that I will be interviewed on local radio station, KPFZ 88.1 FM, at 2:00 pm on Wednesday, December 15. This will be a great opportunity to gain clarity on all of the stress reduction ideas covered in my articles.

Being grateful is a scientifically proven way to reduce stress and depression. Practicing gratitude changes your mind from negative thoughts to positive ones. The human mind thinks very fast. Thoughts occur at an almost instantaneous rate of one ten thousandth of every second. Emotions quickly follow thoughts. So if you have a depressing thought you will quickly feel depressed. Thoughts of gratitude, however, do the opposite. If you feel grateful for something you will automatically change the way you feel to a more positive emotional state. Being grateful brings our attention to what we already have that we feel good about. It takes our minds off of what we think is missing and redirects it to what we have that brings us joy. In the movie, *The Secret*, there is a quote on gratitude which states, "What you think about and thank about, you bring about."

A helpful way to cultivate gratitude is to compare your life to past history. Compared to the past, you have nothing to complain about. The richest kings and queens of history never had it as good as you do. The mere presence of electricity, running water, and refrigeration make your life a dream in comparison to what people of the past had to endure. It is wise to contemplate all of the simple things that make our lives more comfortable. For instance, consider the bedding of the past. Most of human history was spent sleeping on the floor with rodents and insects I might add. The next time you climb into your bed, be grateful for it.

To add some additional illustration, I was recently on a cruise vacation in the Caribbean viewing the coastline of Cuba. At dinner every night my family has a ritual in which we all share with one another what it was we were grateful for that day. We shared this practice with some cruise mates during dinner and one gentleman impressed me when he said he was grateful for all we have as Americans. He mentioned this in reference to our coastline view of Cuba during the day. He was practicing comparative gratitude and his contribution was inspiring for all of us. Liberty is not free and it is wise to acknowledge all those who have made sacrifices so that we can have freedom.

One of the gifts gratitude offers is the resolution of self-pity. When my seven year old son is upset because he did not get his way I will say to him, “Your story is the saddest story I ever heard. Now what are you grateful for?” This is a comical way of shifting his thinking off of feeling sorry for himself. Only you can change negative tendencies such as self-pity. Gratitude is the way.

To match gratitude with mindfulness do the following. First, realize that life is a gift. Every moment is precious, unrecoverable, and never to come again. Additionally, all of your possessions are gifts of which you are the steward. When you leave this world, you will leave with empty pockets. Consider switching the idea of ownership to stewardship and be grateful for all that you have been entrusted.

The next exercise is called, “Breathe in Gratitude.” All through the day, look for things to acknowledge and be grateful for. Choose anything, big or small. Stop, take a breath, and be grateful for your experience. For instance, on my recent vacation I had a hot dog with mustard. I ate it mindfully, dwelling on the flavor, and being grateful at every instant. I took a breath in and let it out as I savored the taste. I know this may sound like a small thing in life, but it is not when you are present with the moment. That moment was precious, unrecoverable, and never to come again, and I was there for it.

I then continued to do this process for the rest of the day for every thing I saw and experienced. What I can tell you with certainty is that fear, stress, and anxiety is impossible when you do this. I also employed this exercise on the way home so that even as my vacation came to a close, I did not despair. This last Sunday, the day before returning to work, I sat in front of the fire and brushed my cat, Lucy. I breathed in and out, grateful for my kitty.