

Coping with the Coronavirus Crisis with Gratitude

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Social media is filled with advice for how to cope with anxiety, stress, and apprehension regarding the current coronavirus lock-down. Important measures to prevent the spread of the virus, to shelter those most vulnerable, and to provide protective medical supplies and equipment to overloaded health care workers and facilities are crucial. In the midst of the need to respond urgently to the crisis, we may consider one other option for coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. This is an opportunity to notice what's going right with the world, or to account for the triumphs that we often take for granted. It is easy to be contented when all is well and life is going as planned. Acceptance becomes the norm. Ease often creates complacency.

On the other hand, circumstances that are unpredictable and ambiguous provide a good time to enumerate the myriad blessings that surround us each day. Noticing and expressing gratitude in difficult times is not only wise but healthy. A few research studies explain why.

In one study, half the students in a university class were assigned to write three things in a journal every day for which they were grateful. The other half of the students were assigned to write down three events or three problems they encountered during the day. At the end of the semester, several tests were performed. All students were given a flu shot. One week later, those keeping a gratitude journal had more antibodies in their systems than did the other students. Gratitude students were detectably healthier in one week. Students were given a mental acuity test, meaning they were tasked with remembering material, memorizing material, and taking tests. Gratitude students scored significantly higher in these tasks than did their counterparts. Students were given a creativity task—for example, how many uses could they think of for a brick or a ping pong ball? Again, significant differences occurred between gratitude students and others.¹ In another study of heart disease patients, half were assigned to keep a gratitude journal for eight weeks, while the other half did not keep a gratitude journal. At the end of the eight week period, gratitude patients had not only deteriorated less in heart health but evidence showed substantial improvements in heart health.² In still another study, individuals exposed to a cold virus (rhino virus) succumbed to the virus and caught a cold less than half as often as other patients when they put themselves in a gratitude condition each day.³

The point is, placing ourselves in a gratitude condition helps us become healthier, physically, emotionally, and mentally. Especially in times when stress and anxiety can be overwhelming, a simple prescription is to count our blessings and to notice what's going right and worth celebrating. I know of organizations with thousands of employees where each employee is asked to keep a gratitude journal every day. One prominent CEO takes time to write five notes expressing gratitude to different employees in his organization each day. Another CEO assigned his employees to positively embarrass someone every day—meaning, compliment someone else in front of someone who cares. The assignment was to notice what's worth celebrating in the behavior of other people. I became familiar with an executive who was diagnosed with breast cancer and given six months to live. She decided that if she only had six months, she would make it a great six months. Her strategy was to approach individuals with whom she had shared what she defined as a “perfect moment.” She approached each of these people and simply described to them the perfect moment they shared and its impact on her. Her cancer is now in remission, but this was such a high impact activity, she now takes an hour at the end of each week to share with her husband the perfect moments of the week.

What are opportunities to feel gratitude or to notice perfect moments in this crisis? Some that might be considered are:

- The chance to renew family relationships and to take time for more intimate family connections
- The chance to demonstrate self-discipline even when inconvenient
- A chance to focus more specifically on individuals who are in need or in tenuous circumstances
- A renewal of feelings of patriotism and unity as a community
- An opportunity to re-evaluate priorities and plans for the future
- An opportunity to catch-up on long overdue projects at home
- A chance to reconnect with people who seldom enter our consciousness
- An opportunity to be exposed to some of the best medical and public health minds in the world
- A reminder of how to prepare for even more significant tragedies and traumatic events in the future
- A chance to learn about the abundance of educational on-line resources

At a time when it is easy to focus on the negative, on hardships, or on inconveniences, highlighting what we are grateful for may be among the most effective ways to weather the crisis and to actually emerge better off.

References

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- (3) Cohen, Sheldon. (2016). *The Common Cold Project: 5 Studies of Behavior, Biology, and the Common Cold*. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2016-09-02. <https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR36365.v1>