

Connecting to Gratitude

Objective: Even in difficult times it's possible to feel gratitude. We may have unpleasant experiences, but connecting to gratitude nourishes our strength to carry on.

Preparation

- Check out Jim Kwik on Gratitude and the brain, [here](#).
- Have a timer and index cards or pieces of paper and pens ready for students.
- Optional: have bittersweet chocolate as metaphor for how life is sometimes: bitter-sweet.

Facts

- A National Institutes of Health study found that when you feel gratitude, your brain gets flooded with dopamine. This gives you a natural high, motivating you to do good and express gratitude even more.
- Gratitude correlates to long-term life satisfaction, increased optimism and happiness, and greater resilience.
- Gratitude can improve our sleep, reduce anxiety and depression, and even help us to overcome trauma and physical pain.

Discussion (10 - 12 minutes)

- Life is full of stressors, some that may be challenging but also rewarding, like school or our social life, and others that we'd really rather not have at all.; things that have no upside and that we really have no control over, right? These stressors can give rise to negative, unpleasant or really difficult emotions. It's important that we give ourselves opportunities to pay attention to whatever we're feeling and not to pretend it's not happening. We can check in with ourselves and acknowledge whatever is going on, and rely on some of the tools we learned in earlier mindfulness sessions, like My Happy Place and connecting to others for support. Sometimes sharing what's going on with a trusted person can help relieve the pressure and also connect us to others.
- Have you noticed on social media the whole #blessed phenomenon? As if taking a selfie in front of your private jet and posting it online with #blessed hashtag is a way to practice gratitude. True gratitude is not about showboating. Nor is it about maniacally focusing on the positive and pretending that we live in a problem-free world. Nor is it saying 'thank you' in expectation of future rewards, like a "quid pro quo."
- Also, gratitude isn't about saying thank you or acting grateful because that's the "nice" or socially-accepted thing to do. These are just societal expectations.
- Wouldn't you rather truly FEEL gratitude deep down, even if it's for small simple things?

Discussion continued...

- Remember the phrase we learned, “What fires together, wires together”? It means that the things we choose to pay attention to on a regular basis become habitual. Even when times are rough, we can find small, simple things to focus on which are positive. This is the same idea we explored before, Rick Hanson’s practice of “soaking in the good.”
- Again, good things can be big and important, like our home, family and friends. But good things also come in small packages. Some examples might include our ability to see, smell, hear and taste, having our ten fingers/ toes, sunshine on our faces, a smile from a friend, a silly joke, a good lunch, feeling part of a group, our own abilities or cuddling with a pet. Gratitude doesn’t have to be anything grand or expensive or fancy – have you noticed that? *Allow students to comment and share their thoughts.*

Exercise (5 - 7 minutes; Pause between statements as you see fit)

1. Repeat prompts and suggestions from previous mindfulness practices to start. Ring bell
2. Take a few deep breaths just to arrive. Feel your contact points: feet on the floor, seat and back on the chair. Try silently inviting your body and mind to relax, there’s nothing else you need to do right now... take a break and just be you...
3. Sense the other POPS people around you, knowing you’re safe, among friends...
4. Your senses connect you to your experience, so at your own pace try to simply notice any sounds, feelings on your skin, temperature, tastes or other senses.
5. Imagine all the things surrounding you: other folks who share some commonalities with you, and care about you; things in this room, things in your pocket or even in your own body... See if being aware of these things allow any positive feelings to arise.
6. Now take a few moments to identify three things that you feel grateful for. They can be big or small, in the room or elsewhere, tangible or intangible...
7. Open your eyes and write down your three things. Take a deep breath, and then for the next 30 seconds, keep writing anything that pops into your mind for which you feel grateful, big or small. No one else is going to look at your list – it’s just for you. Ready, Go! (*Put timer on for 30 seconds and ring bell at the end of the time*) OK, Stop.
8. Go back and read over your list – were you surprised by anything? Share one or two things with your neighbor and explain why you feel grateful for each one.
9. Now sit back, close your eyes (or soft focus) and take three deep breaths. Take a moment to check in with yourself... notice how you feel now. Has anything changed?
10. **Invitation:** Once a day take a few minutes to make a gratitude list of at least three things – remember: they can be very small simple things that happened during your day. See what happens and let’s share in a few weeks!