Expressions of Gratitude

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“Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow.”

~ Melody Beattie

Addiction often is colored by regret and resentment. Negativity feeds feelings of isolation and loneliness. It increases stress, undermines health and places a strain on relationships. It dampens expectations and motivations. The familiar role of victim challenges the ability to have inner peace. Self pity can encourage complacency to settle in, and feelings of serenity appear distant and unreachable.

However, the daily practice of gratitude can improve mental and physical well-being. Researchers Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough study the nature, qualities and impact of gratitude and how the association of an attitude of optimism has beneficial impact on physiological and social aspects of the individual, enhancing the meaning of life. Therefore, the practice of gratitude is valuable to recovery, as it catalyzes personal motivation and helps safeguard sobriety.

What is Gratitude for a recovering person? In 12 step tradition it is more than an attitude. It is about getting “Into Action” and “Passing it On” as Bill W. wrote in a 1959 letter:

“Gratitude should go forward, rather than backward. In other words, if you carry the message to still others, you will be making the best possible repayment for the help given you.” (As Bill Sees It - pg. 29)

Bill W. noted that gratitude is a way that the pain from powerlessness and unmanageability of
addiction teaches about growing. Gratitude is an awareness and acknowledgment of an experience in life that gives happiness. These insights lead to a new found freedom, for a thankful heart cannot hold conceit and self centeredness simultaneously. Acts of humility are a natural antidote to an ego prone to self congratulations and grandiosity. Gratitude is essential for physical, mental, emotional and spiritual balance.

Viktor Frankl, psychiatrist and death camp survivor noted in “Man’s Search for Meaning”, “Everything can be taken from a man or a woman but one thing: the last of human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.” (p.104)

This action of choice to be grateful gives meaning to living. It helps manage the difficult seasons of life. It changes interaction with the world in a way to support recovery thinking and behaviours. Perennial wisdom traditions advocate the importance of nurturing this way of being for spiritual development and cognitive shifts in perspective to form. The research indicates a positive correlation between gratitude and positive thinking. These practices help support the coherence of heart with mind to develop an informed and compassionate wise mind. Gratitude practices create meaning and support the shift in perspective to a “freedom to” make a “decision for” recovery, and in this way leads to less self-absorption.

Neuroscience researcher Korb postulates that the practice of active awareness of appreciation creates a positive feedback loop or “virtuous cycle” in the brain’s reward circuitry. Dopamine, the feel good neurotransmitter is activated with expressions of gratitude. When there is an increase in dopamine, there is an increased likelihood that these actions will be repeated to feel good.

**Empirical Benefits of the Practice of Gratitude**

Researchers Emmons and McCullough summarize the benefits of practicing thankfulness daily. These include fewer physical uncomfortable symptoms, decreased irritability, decreased pain perception sensitivity, increased sleep duration and quality of sleep, increased attention and positive states of alertness, improved self-esteem, increased energy and motivation, increased empathy and willingness to help others, increased resourcefulness and optimism, improved sociability and immune resiliency.
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The results from practicing gratitude are helpful qualities in supporting the transition in perspective from addiction into recovery. Resentments begin to fade as humility graces the beauty of emotional growing.

Ways to Cultivate Gratitude

A shift in perspective is necessary in order to develop a new habit of gratitude. Two of the obstacles for success in changing habits are forgetfulness and a lack of awareness. These obstacles can be countered by the use of visual cues that trigger thoughts of gratitude and setting the intention of commitment to practice.

- Keep a Daily Gratitude Journal of things you are thankful for.
- Make a daily practice to tell someone something you appreciate about them.
- When looking in the mirror think about something that you have done in the past 24 hours to nurture your recovery.
- Write a 300 word letter to someone who has changed your life and deliver it to them.
- Practice the Metta Meditation of Loving Kindness.
- Learn prayers of gratitude.
- Practice Japanese Meditation of Naikan by reflecting on 3 questions.
  - What have I received from _____?
  - What have I given to _____?
  - What troubles and difficulties have I caused?

Use a Visual Reminder, such as a gratitude jar or box to remind yourself to write down your gratitude. On days of unhappiness, select one of your blessings from your past Self to inspire you toward remembering in this present moment you have sobriety.

References

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